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THE
MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

VOLUME IX

"THUS WAS THE BRILLIANT VENETIA DRESSED"
Photogravure from original by Merrill.

"THUS WAS THE BRILLIANT VENETIA DRESSED"

Photogravure from original by Lenbach

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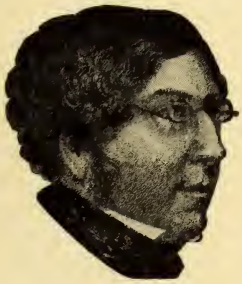
The Works of

George W. M. Reynolds

Venetia Trelawney

Volume IV

The Mysteries of the Court of London



Privately Printed
For Members of
The Oxford Society
London Boston

De Luxe Edition

Of this edition, printed for members of The Oxford Society, but One Thousand copies have been issued, of which this is copy

No. 424

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THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE FIRST

It was about ten o'clock at night, and the sky was covered with dark clouds which were borne swiftly along upon the wings of a strong wind. Every now and then the moonbeams shone forth for a few moments from amidst those sombre and variable curtains which nature had stretched over the empyrean arch, but during the intervals, when the planet of the night was veiled behind those clouds, a total darkness prevailed in Geneva and the surrounding country.

Though in the middle of April, it was a tempestuous night, and the immense lake was lashed by the wind into rolling billows, so that the sound of its murmurings, moanings, and plashings might be heard to a considerable distance. Altogether it was such a night that no person would care to be abroad unless on urgent business or in pursuit of those evil avocations which were congenial with the hour and the darkness, and yet a female form was proceeding rapidly along that narrow road which ran through the fields at the back of the villa.

Closely enveloped in her capacious mantle, and with a thick veil drawn over her countenance, Mrs. Ranger it was whom we find thus daring the inclemency of the night. Quick was her pace as she proceeded in the direction of the city, on gaining the streets of which she at once took the

nearest way to the abode of Doctor Maravelli. This individual, in consequence of certain intimations received from Mrs. Ranger, had been holding himself in readiness for three or four days past to be summoned at a moment's notice on the secret and delicate business for which he had been duly retained. Mrs. Ranger therefore found him at home and prepared to accompany her forthwith.

Before they set out, however, Mrs. Ranger bound a silk handkerchief over the doctor's eyes. Then, with every appearance of the most solemn earnestness, she said, "I now adjure you, by the oath you have already taken, not to move this bandage from your eyes, nor allow it to shift its position without at once informing me."

"I repeat the oath I have previously given you," said the doctor. "No sentiment of idle curiosity ever animates me. Besides, apart from this bandage, the blackness of the night is such that if the clue were once lost to the route we are about to take, it would be impossible to distinguish or recognize any specific locality, even were I not blindfolded at all."

Mrs. Ranger made no response, but taking the doctor's hand, she led him forth from his house. On emerging thence, she conducted him up one street and down another, so that he might at least believe that she was sincere in her expressed desire that he should remain utterly in the dark as to his ultimate destination. On the other hand, Doctor Maravelli, in spite of his repudiation of any undue curiosity, had all along resolved to ascertain, if possible, not only the house to which he was to be taken, but also who his patient might be. That she was a lady of rank he had naturally concluded, not only from the apparent pains taken to hush up the consequences of her frailty, but also from the liberality with which he was paid for his services. Being a thoroughly unprincipled man, greedily avaricious on the one hand, and an inveterate gambler on the other, his fingers were ever itching for the contact of that precious coin which, by a strange idiosyncrasy, he would lavish again in profusion at the gaming-table. His profession was eminently lucrative, but his habits made him ever needy; and thus, although well paid to keep his oath inviolate in the present instance, he nevertheless from the very first made up his mind to penetrate it if possible, so that when the honour of his fair

patient was placed at his mercy he might avail himself of the secret for future extortions.

The reader has now obtained a full insight into the character of Doctor Maravelli. But it must not be thought that Mrs. Ranger herself was entirely ignorant on the same head. No such thing. When her artfully pursued researches for a doctor first brought Maravelli's name to her knowledge, she made the fullest inquiries into his character, and thence was it she ascertained, as we have heard her inform Agatha, that he was just the very person suited for the aims they had in view. Thus was Mrs. Ranger well aware that the doctor would endeavour to penetrate the present mystery, and it was entirely in accordance with her own secret plan that he should do so, — that is to say, to a certain extent. Had she been really serious in her expressed desire to prevent him from ascertaining whither he was now being led, she would not have contented herself with merely fastening a bandage over his eyes and binding him by oath not to remove it. She would have taken some other steps and have multiplied her precautions, so as to ensure the effectual maintenance of the mystery.

However, to continue the thread of our narrative, we may observe that the doctor, believing Mrs. Ranger to be positively sincere in all her precautions, laughed in his sleeve at the idea of being simply blindfolded and then led up and down two or three streets, as if a man who had dwelt all his life in Geneva could not follow by memory alone the windings and turnings along which he was thus conducted. But even if he felt any doubt upon this subject, he had only to raise the bandage from his eyes very stealthily with one hand while Mrs. Ranger led him by the other, and in one of those intervals when the moon darted forth its beams from behind a cloud could he distinguish the route by which he was being conducted.

Not a word was spoken between Mrs. Ranger and the doctor while she was guiding him up and down three or four streets, as already observed, but when she had led him out of the city and they were proceeding hand in hand along the road through the fields, Maravelli broke the silence by saying, " And so, madam, the crisis has at length come? "

" Yes," answered Mrs. Ranger, " my friend, the lady in whom I am so deeply interested, was seized with all the

premonitory symptoms of approaching maternity soon after nine o'clock this evening, and, judging from the experience which I myself have had in those matters, I think I can safely promise that you will not be detained long at the house to which I am about to conduct you, but that all will be over in a very short time."

A few more observations in a similar strain passed between Mrs. Ranger and the doctor, but it is not worth while to record them. We must, however, observe that as they were proceeding along the road, Maravelli raised the bandage, and by the light of the transient moonbeams discovered the path which they were pursuing. He immediately suspected that he was being led to the villa. He knew that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales dwelt with her suite at that place, and if his patient were indeed an inmate of those walls, he could well understand wherefore the utmost pains should be adopted to hush the matter up.

On reaching the garden wall which looked upon the road, Mrs. Ranger immediately opened the private door by means of a key which she had with her, and conducting the doctor inside the enclosure, she said, in a low but impressive whisper, " Not a word, not a syllable, every possible precaution is now needful."

Maravelli pressed her hand significantly, as much as to imply that she had no need to apprehend any thoughtlessness on his part, and while she conducted him through the garden, another glimpse stealthily obtained from under the bandage showed him it was indeed within the precincts of the villa that he had been introduced. Delighted at the adventure, Maravelli inwardly resolved that it should prove a profitable one for him.

The back entrance into the villa was now reached, and Mrs. Ranger led the doctor up that private staircase which has been already more than once alluded to in preceding chapters. The passage on the second story was speedily reached, and as Mrs. Ranger hurried Maravelli along, a door at the end was noiselessly opened, and a head was thrust forth. This was Mrs. Hubbard, whose listening ears had caught the sounds of footsteps, slight and scarcely audible though they were; but the instant she thus looked forth to satisfy her curiosity, Mrs. Ranger made a rapid gesture with the hand, and the laundress accordingly

retreated into her chamber, closing the door as gently as possible.

The next moment Mrs. Ranger conducted the doctor into the apartment occupied by Agatha Owen.

Here we must interrupt the thread of our narrative for the moment, in order to explain certain details with which it is necessary to make the reader acquainted.

It was eleven o'clock — about a quarter of an hour after Mrs. Ranger and Maravelli had entered the villa — when a post-chaise, drawn by four horses, issued forth from Geneva by that same secluded road which ran through the fields, and which has been so frequently mentioned in recent chapters. On arriving within about a hundred yards of the villa, the equipage stopped, and three men leaped forth from the interior. Bidding the postilions wait patiently, they proceeded on foot along the road until they reached the boundary wall of the garden, and then stopping short, they appeared to expect some arrival which was to guide their next proceedings.

In a few minutes the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas arrived on horseback, and, dismounting from their animals, they fastened the bridles to the bough of a tree at a distance of about fifty yards from the villa.

The nobleman and the colonel were enveloped in travelling cloaks, and seemed prepared for a somewhat lengthy journey during the night. Without delay — the moment they dismounted from their steeds — they repaired to the spot where the three individuals already mentioned were waiting; and we may at once observe that these persons were none others than the fishers of men, — Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden.

" You are punctual," said the earl, immediately addressing them in a low tone and speaking in the French language. " This looks businesslike."

" You will find the whole matter conducted as nicely, as noiselessly, and as expeditiously as you could wish," responded Kobolt. " Show us where it is likely the fair ones will be in a few minutes, and leave the rest to us."

" Here," said the Earl of Curzon, indicating a particular part of the wall against which stood the stump of a tree, as was revealed to the eyes of the three men by the moon-

beams which shot forth at the instant, " this is where you would do well to scale the barrier and enter the enclosure. The lady will be walking in one of the avenues close by, but the moment she hears the sound of footsteps she will hasten toward you. Then seize upon her, gag her, reck not for her struggle or resistance — "

" Ay, ay," said Kobolt, " we understand all that. Leave us to manage the carrying-off part of the business. Now, sir," he added, turning toward Colonel Malpas, " which part of the grounds are we to enter for your lady? "

" We must proceed a little farther on," answered Malpas. Then having led the way to a point below the garden door, he said, " Here, this is the place, and I have only to repeat the same instructions which my comrade has already given you: namely, that the moment the lady accosts you, which she will do, you must pounce upon her, and seal her lips with your hand — "

" But no unnecessary violence with either," interjected the Earl of Curzon. " No damage to the sweet lips and the beautiful teeth — "

" Trust us, we will be as gentle as lambs in carrying off the fair ones," interrupted Kobolt. " No further instructions are necessary. We know what to do. You can mount your horses, and away with you on the road to Lausanne. In less than a quarter of an hour we shall be on the same track, with the ladies in the carriage, that is to say, provided they keep the appointments, as you, gentlemen, have stated."

" There is no fear of it," remarked the Earl of Curzon. " At all events, I can safely answer for one."

" And I for the other," rejoined Malpas.

The nobleman and the colonel now left the three desperadoes to execute the work entrusted to them, and returning to the spot where they had left their horses, they remounted the animals, and galloping away, took the broad open road leading along the shore of the crescent-shaped lake toward Lausanne.

CHAPTER II

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE SECOND

We must now peep into the bedchamber belonging to Miss Emma Owen, and there, at about the same time the preceding incidents were taking place, we shall find that young lady and her sister Julia in close and earnest conference together.

They were seated together upon a sofa, and the wax candles, which stood upon the elegant toilet-table, shed their light upon the animated countenances of the two sisters and were reflected in their sparkling eyes. Having laid aside the handsome dresses which constituted the evening costume fitted for the dining-table and drawing-room of their royal mistress, they had put on loose wrappers, the negligence of which and the soft abandonment of the whole form which they seemed to indicate invested these lovely but dissolute girls with an air of voluptuous languor. Nevertheless their features, as we have just observed, were animated with the glow of excitement and with a certain agitation of the feelings.

"This is truly provoking, Emma," said the sentimental Julia. "What is to be done?"

"My dear girl, I have already told you," returned her sister with a laugh, "that we must deprive ourselves of the company of our lovers for this night. When we made each our respective appointments, we did not foresee that Agatha would so soon — But, no matter, you know, Julia, what we have to do, and Mrs. Ranger may come any moment to fetch us. Therefore we must be here in readiness to attend her summons without a single instant's delay."

"I am aware of all that," said Julia, pouting. "But surely I can be spared just for one moment, to meet Curzon

and make some excuse for not introducing him into my own chamber to-night?"

"And why should I not feel an equal anxiety to do the same toward Malpas?" asked Emma. Then, without waiting for a reply, she said, somewhat impatiently, "No, my dear Julia, we must do nothing that can possibly injure the even tenor and the safe progress of matters elsewhere. It is sufficient that Mrs. Ranger has this moment introduced the doctor into the house, without our running out and in to chat with our lovers. Only fancy what troubles might ensue if any disturbance were created or any exposure took place, through thoughtlessness or carelessness on our part."

"But I do not mean — I do not propose for an instant," exclaimed Julia, "that we should bring in Curzon or Malpas to-night. What I meant was, that as we have each given our lovers an appointment, and as they will be sure to keep it, it will be better that we should just hasten to them, if only for a moment, so as to prevent them from lounging about in the gardens, not only at the risk of being discovered, but also at that of encountering each other."

"I again protest against such a proceeding on our parts," said Emma. "Agatha is now in the pains of labour, and Mrs. Ranger has just stealthily introduced the doctor to her apartment. Presently there will be more goings-out. Why should we increase the number of these movements backward and forward, and thus run a risk of creating an alarm? Suppose that such alarm be created, the princess herself might come forth from her own chamber to ascertain what was the matter, and then Mrs. Hubbard would see at once that it is not her Royal Highness who is this night becoming a mother and for whom the doctor has been so secretly smuggled into the villa. Nay, more, it might be discovered that Agatha was thus giving birth to a child — "

"Yes, yes," said Julia, nervously, "I perceive full well that too much precaution on our part cannot be exercised."

"Now you are speaking reasonably," exclaimed Emma. "Besides, have you not told Curzon that whenever you fail to be punctual at the place of meeting, he is to conclude that something has transpired to prevent you from keeping the appointment?"

"Oh, yes, I have invariably given him that warning," replied Julia. "Indeed, I have always begged and implored

that he would not remain five minutes beyond the appointed hour."

"And I have spoken in the same terms to Malpas," remarked Emma. "There is consequently nothing to fear. When they find that we do not join them, they will take their departure each by his own special route, instead of lingering in the grounds."

"The worst of it is," said Julia, still in a tone of deep regret, "that I told Curzon so positively I would meet him to-night, no matter what weather it might be — "

"And I gave an equally serious promise to the colonel," interrupted Emma. "But they both know full well, or at least must suppose, that we are not altogether our own mistresses, but to a considerable extent are dependent on the will, if not the caprice, of her Royal Highness. And after all, I have no doubt that Curzon on the one hand, and Malpas on the other, only wish to renew their mingled persuasions, entreaties, and threats, to induce us to run away with them. As if I," exclaimed Emma, laughing merrily, and thus unconsciously displaying to full advantage the two rows of brilliant teeth which adorned her mouth, "as if I would ever compromise myself so far as to elope with a married man, — a colonel who has sold his commission, — a mere fashionable dangler, without a shilling in his pocket. No, no, Malpas is good-looking, and is therefore all very well as a lover in secret — And you, Julia," added Emma, suddenly interrupting herself to fix her attention upon her sister, "you surely would not be foolish enough to run away with Curzon, — an insolvent nobleman steeped to the very lips in debt, and who would abandon you the moment he was sated with your beauties or felt you to be a burden on his finances? "

"Do you — do you really think," asked Julia, with tremulous voice and hesitating manner, "that Curzon is so selfish, so unprincipled? "

"Of course, all men are," rejoined Emma, decisively, as if there could be no doubt relative to the truth of her averment. "Curzon and Malpas have most probably left England to avoid their debts and duns, or else why should they have been travelling in a humble manner — "

"You forget, Emma," interrupted her sister, "that we are not aware in what manner our lovers were travelling

before they fell in with us at Milan. In fact, it was thence that Curzon followed me in so secret and stealthy a manner, and the same may be said of the proceedings of Malpas toward yourself."

"Well," exclaimed Emma, "there is no doubt that they have hitherto been infatuated with regard to us, and if they were single men, with good fortunes, we might inveigle them into the matrimonial noose. As it is, things are quite different; they are both married, and both notoriously hampered in their finances. Very certain is it, then, that I do not intend to ruin myself for ever by an elopement with Malpas, and I sincerely hope that you are equally well resolved with regard to Curzon? You do not answer me, Julia — "

"I confess that I am not altogether indifferent to the earl's handsome person and agreeable manners," remarked Julia. Then, with a sudden assumption of firmness and decision, she said, "But I agree with you, sister. It would be the height of folly to elope with a married man who does not possess a fortune as an indemnification for the other drawbacks of his position. Very clear, however, is it that I shall now soon lose Curzon altogether," added Julia, with a profound sigh.

"And are there no other lovers in the world to be obtained?" demanded Emma, impatiently. "Julia, my dear girl, without flattery let me assure you that you are handsomer than ever, and you need not fear that you will long remain without such sweet solace as you require, even though Curzon should abandon you to-morrow. For my part, I mean to tell Malpas plainly enough that if he annoys me with any further entreaties to elope with him, he had better depart altogether; for though I like him very well as a lover, I am not prepared to submit to him as a dictator."

"What can Curzon mean," asked Julia, "by constantly hinting that I ought to give him my fullest confidence, that I should keep no secrets from him, that I should unbosom myself altogether — "

"Oh, Malpas talks to me in precisely the same strain," interrupted Emma, petulantly, "as I have told you over and over again. But this is the way with all men who seek to persuade a woman into a particular course. Here, Curzon on the one hand and Malpas on the other are seeking to

worm themselves altogether into our confidence. They know that ladies in our position are acquainted with many little secrets connected with the royal personages, and so on, and they think that by breaking down every barrier of reserve, they establish a greater familiarity, a deeper intimacy, and thus render themselves indispensably necessary to us."

"But all this must arise," said Julia, "from — from —"

"Love, you would say?" exclaimed Emma. "No, it is a temporary infatuation on their part. Without vanity, we may declare ourselves to be two very fine girls. We have everything in our favour, and it is no wonder that Curzon and Malpas, sheer voluptuaries in their hearts, should be for a season captivated by our beauty and enchained by our fascinations. Besides, the whole adventure has for them a mystery which increases its charm to an ineffable degree. But once let Malpas have me altogether to himself, dwelling with him as his mistress, constantly with him from morning to night, or let the same take place with you and Curzon, and the result will speedily show how fickle and inconstant man can soon become wearied of the most beautiful woman."

"There is a great deal of truth in what you say," remarked Julia, evidently much struck by her sister's observations. "Therefore, solemnly and emphatically do I assure you that, happen what may, I will not suffer myself to be persuaded to elope with Lord Curzon. And now tell me, Emma, has it never struck you as singular that the earl and the colonel should not have once met? For if they had, the one would have told me and the other would have told you — "

"As a matter of course they would avoid such an encounter, even if they were to behold each other from a distance," interrupted Emma, "for as they are each living under a false name, humbly, obscurely, and even mysteriously, they would of course avoid a meeting which would either render explanations necessary, or else, by the refusal of them, leave a singular impression upon each other's mind. No, I do not for a moment suppose that they have met, for even when coming to the villa at night to keep their appointments respectively with you and me, they have to take separate paths in order to reach the distinct points

where we thus encounter them, and if one heard the footsteps of the other, he would of course try to get out of his way. Thus when two men, though in reality well acquainted with each other, — as we know that the earl and the colonel were in London, — have each a distinct, separate, and special reason for preserving an *incognito* at some place afar from home, I believe that they may succeed in doing so for months, and even years, to such an extent that the one shall not even have an idea of the presence of the other in the same city."

"I can assure you, Emma," said Julia, "that my lover is most heartily tired of preserving this *incognito*."

"And mine also," responded Emma. "But as I have before told you, there are other good-looking and amorously disposed young men in the world, and amongst the foreign noblemen and gentlemen who visit at the villa I have seen more than one who would compensate me for the loss of Malpas. Let our two present lovers go, then, and the sooner the better, if their infatuation becomes a positive persecution toward ourselves. They have answered our purpose in a double sense. They have suited us as gallants in a pretty little intrigue, and they have aided us in fulfilling the behest of our friends in England. We have made them our dupes, our agents, and our instruments in the ramifications of conspiracy, as well as our paramours in the transports of love. From the very first moment that Malpas began to demonstrate peculiar and unmistakable attentions to me at Milan did I perceive how it would be possible to render him useful in the grand designs which we were appointed to carry out. You also, on your side, Julia, foresaw the same result with regard to Curzon, and within the last few days our foreknowledge in those respects has been amply justified. Truly Mrs. Ranger is a very, very clever woman, for to her is due all the credit of the idea involving the princess's ermine cloak and green silk hood."

"Yes, and to her also," added Julia, "may be attributed the idea of putting Mrs. Hubbard on the watch."

"'Twas excellent," exclaimed Emma, laughing merrily. "But what shall we say of that other idea for which we are indebted to the splendid invention of Mrs. Ranger?" she asked, significantly.

" What, your dressing up in male apparel, with a pair of false whiskers and mustachios? " said Julia, laughing in her turn.

" Now did I not, when thus dressed up, personate Bergami to perfection? " exclaimed Emma, as if the tremendous phase to which she was now alluding, in the hideous conspiracy whereof she and her sisters were the instruments, could be made an object of triumph and self-felicitation. " Worthy Mrs. Ranger has indeed managed uncommonly well, for whenever I was performing the part of Bergami, and when appearing to steal so cautiously along the passage, Mrs. Ranger always compelled the observant Mrs. Hubbard to retreat from her prying position at her chamber door the moment that I reached the entrance into the princess's apartment. Ah! little thought the scandal-loving laundress that the Bergami she thus saw was but a false one, after all, merely Miss Emma Owen dressed up to resemble the handsome equerry, and that, so far from ever penetrating into her Royal Highness's apartment in such a guise and at such an hour of the night, I stole hastily back to my own the instant I knew the said Mrs. Hubbard was no longer peeping forth at the end of the passage."

" There can be no doubt," said Julia, " that we are doing our best to fulfil the instructions of those who placed us about the person of her Royal Highness."

" Especially within the last few days," said Emma, " have we managed to heap together an immense amount of circumstantial evidence tending to criminate the princess, and now, the proceedings of this night will tend to crown them all."

" Yes," added Julia, " for good Mrs. Ranger has done her best to confirm Mrs. Hubbard in the belief that 'tis the princess herself who is about to become a mother, and thus is the web rapidly closing in around the unconscious and I must say undeserving and much-to-be-pitied wife of the prince regent."

" Ah! if we were all well-off, rich, and independent, you, I, and Agatha," observed Emma, " we might then afford to show pity and forbearance toward one of our own sex; but we dare not, no, we dare not, Julia. We must continue to steel our hearts against her, even as we have already hardened them. Methought that her Royal Highness was

never so amiable, never so kind, never so truly affable and winning as when this morning, surrounded by her ladies, she chatted so familiarly with us all. Then for a moment did my heart quiver, and strange feelings pass over me, as a sense of the treacherous part which I was enacting struck keenly and acutely upon my soul. But I stifled the sensation, trampled it, as it were, underfoot — "

"Say no more, sister," cried Julia, with evident trepidation. "That is a feeling which I myself have also experienced more than once, ay, many, many times, and I cannot bear to think of it. But I wonder whether Curzon and Malpas are still waiting there, or whether they are gone," she suddenly observed, in order to change the conversation. "'Tis past eleven o'clock," she added, glancing at the timepiece which stood upon the mantel.

"Yes, more than a quarter past," observed Emma, "and as our appointments were respectively fixed for eleven punctually, it is not likely that our lovers are waiting still. I wonder how long it will be before we are summoned to Agatha's room."

"And I wonder how Agatha herself, poor girl! is getting on," added Julia, a sudden shade appearing upon her countenance. "What if anything fatal were to happen to her?" she inquired, with a chill shudder passing visibly over her form.

"Heavens!" ejaculated Emma, catching the infection of that cold tremor, "do not meet misfortunes half-way; do not anticipate an evil that would necessitate the fullest and completest exposure."

At this moment a low but hasty knock at the door of the apartment cut short the conversation between the young ladies, and issuing gently forth, they at once proceeded to Agatha's chamber, which was precisely opposite. A small lamp was there burning, dimly and feebly, in the fireplace, but the heavy draperies were carefully drawn over the casements, so as to prevent even that faint glimmer from being observed without, it being a part of the various precautions adopted that there should be no ground, whatever might transpire thereafter, for any one to be able to affirm that there was a light seen in Agatha's chamber on this occasion.

The curtains were also drawn closely around the bed in

which Agatha lay, and she herself had her head completely enveloped in a thick black veil. But so feeble was the light that this precaution was scarcely necessary, for the room was already dark enough, and within the deeper obscurity of the couch, surrounded as it was by draperies, it would have been impossible for Maravelli, had he chosen to raise his bandage, to distinguish the features of his patient with a view to future recognition. So dull, indeed, was that light that no mere transient glance furtively thrown around the room would enable the doctor to observe its appearance in such a way as to know it again; and we may here observe that when Mrs. Ranger quitted the chamber and crossed the passage for a moment to knock at Emma's door opposite, she took the lamp with her. For be it understood that the object was to let Doctor Maravelli go forth from the villa that night with the impression that it was the Princess of Wales whom he had delivered of a child; hence the real absence of efficient precaution on the part of Mrs. Ranger when conducting him from Geneva to the villa. In plain terms, she wished him to know that it was the villa which he thus entered, but it must be obvious to the reader that she did not want him to know which room it was in the villa where his patient was confined.

With these explanatory observations we resume the thread of our history.

The moment Emma and Julia entered the chamber they beheld the doctor, with the black bandage over his eyes, seated by the side of the couch, holding Agatha's arm in such a way that he could feel her pulse. Mrs. Ranger, on speeding back into the chamber after knocking at Emma's door, had again deposited the lamp in the depth of the spacious hearth. Then, turning toward the two girls as they entered immediately after, she pointed significantly to an object upon a chair. Emma and Julia instantaneously comprehended the truth, from the expression of her countenance, for she had laid aside her cloak, bonnet, and veil, for the present. Then a few words conveyed in a hasty whisper ratified the idea which the girls had conceived. To be brief, Agatha had been delivered of a still-born child, and the tiny corpse was enveloped in a flannel ready to be taken away. Indeed, the doctor was at this moment satisfying himself, by feeling his patient's pulse and putting to

her a few brief questions, that she was in a condition that would justify him in leaving her.

Emma and Julia were slightly shocked when the well wrapped up corpse of their sister's child was thus pointed out to them, but the next moment they both experienced a feeling of satisfaction that the babe was dead; and in answer to the rapid question which they whisperingly put to Mrs. Ranger relative to Agatha's condition, they were still more rejoiced on learning that she was progressing favourably.

Now, then, came the moment for these young ladies to play the part already arranged for them, and which was a contrivance admirably adapted to display the diabolical ingenuity of Mrs. Ranger, — a contrivance invested with an air so natural and so perfectly genuine that it was indeed but too well calculated to make the desired impression upon Doctor Maravelli's mind, namely, that it was the royal mistress of that villa who was his patient now.

The moment those few whispered words already alluded to had been exchanged between the sisters and Mrs. Ranger, the two young ladies advanced quickly toward the couch, and as if labouring under the excitement of the sincerest feelings of devotion and love, they threw themselves upon their knees, seizing Agatha's hand and pressing it by turns to their lips. Then, as if hurried away by excess of emotion, Emma murmured, " Oh, dearest, dearest princess! "

" Beloved princess! " added Julia, also in accents that seemed characteristic of the most genuine excitement.

At the same instant Mrs. Ranger darted forward, as if perfectly horrified at the expressions which had just fallen from the young ladies' lips, and with a quick " Hush! hush! " which seemed to denote a terrible perturbation on her part.

Nothing of all this was lost upon the doctor. Without understanding English, the word princess, as just pronounced by the young ladies' lips, was quite intelligible to him, — the French word being very nearly the same; and then the sudden flurry into which Mrs. Ranger seemed to be thrown, and her apparent eagerness to prevent any further ebullition of the feelings on their part, naturally confirmed Maravelli's belief that the patient whom he had been brought hither under such mysterious circumstances to attend upon could be none other than the Princess of Wales.

CHAPTER III

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE THIRD

Thus far all the plans, plots, and machinations of Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen, relative to the proceeding of this memorable night, were crowned with success. But now the curtain was about to rise upon a new phase in the intricately woven and strangely ramified performance.

Emma and Julia had been brought into their sister's room on the present occasion for two reasons. The first was to enact the little scene with the description of which we closed the preceding chapter; the second was to keep watch upon Maravelli for the few moments during which Mrs. Ranger was now compelled to absent herself from the apartment.

Hastily threading the passage, the wily woman repaired to the chamber occupied by Mrs. Hubbard, who had not retired to rest. Indeed, the light burning upon the table showed the liveliest curiosity, mingled with an air of much mystery and importance, on the features of the laundress, and the moment Mrs. Ranger entered the room, she rushed forward, exclaiming, quickly, " Wal, mem, be it all over? "

" Yes, all, and well over, too," answered Mrs. Ranger, significantly. " The child is dead."

" Dead! " ejaculated Mrs. Hubbard, holding up her arms with an affectation of dismay. " The poor leetle hinnocent lambkin of a babby! "

" There is nothing to regret," said Mrs. Ranger, speaking quickly. " It is much better it should be so."

" Wal, so it be, mem," observed Mrs. Hubbard, " and I always thought what a blessin' it would be if as how the egspected little un should hop the twig, as they say of the dear little birds — But," she cried, suddenly interrupting

herself, for she saw that her visitant was looking somewhat impatient, " if so be there is anythink I can do — "

" Well, my dear good woman," said Mrs. Ranger, " this is precisely the reason that has brought me hither. For as I have considered you deserving of my confidence, and regarding you as a discreet, well-behaved, and prudent woman, I have not hesitated to trust you hitherto, and am going to trust you still further now — There, pray don't interrupt me, but listen. The child is dead and must be taken hence at once. The doctor is ready to depart — "

" Marmajelly, mem? " said Mrs. Hubbard, in inquiring allusion to the doctor's name.

" Yes, Maravelli," answered Mrs. Ranger, quickly. " He is ready to depart, and I must conduct him back to the city, because, as you beheld him when you peeped forth from your room ere now, he is blindfolded. He will take charge of the corpse, he will dispose of it. But while descending the stairs and threading the garden, there may be some risk of being observed, and if a strange man were thus seen within the precincts of the villa, an alarm would be raised, he would be arrested, and then if the corpse were discovered — You understand me, you can guess the service I require at your hands? That staircase," she added, hastily, pointing to the one in the corner of the room, " leads up into the laundry, and from the laundry there is another means of communication down into the garden. Is it not so? Good. Will you, then, take charge of the dead child, steal forth, make the circuit of the grounds, and meet me and the doctor at the door opening in the garden wall on the road through the fields? "

Mrs. Hubbard, who felt herself suddenly elevated to a very high pedestal of importance by being thus admitted into what she supposed to be a stupendous secret regarding the honour of the Princess of Wales, at once consented to render the service required at her hands. Thereupon Mrs. Ranger left her for a few moments, and as she went down the passage, extinguished the light burning there, so as to prevent Mrs. Hubbard from noticing which room it was she entered, in case the worthy woman should think fit to peep through the keyhole.

On reëntering Agatha's chamber again, Mrs. Ranger, who was assuredly as indefatigable as she was astute for all

purposes of evil, made a hasty sign indicative that all was right, and this was promptly understood by Emma and Julia, who were now standing by the side of the bed, closely watching Maravelli. Taking up the corpse of the child, Mrs. Ranger hurried back to the apartment of the laundress, to whom she immediately consigned the light but somewhat repulsive burden. Then having seen Mrs. Hubbard, who had previously huddled on a cloak and bonnet, disappear with the object entrusted to her up the staircase to the laundry, Mrs. Ranger sped back to Agatha's chamber. Here she once more resumed her own cloak, bonnet, and thick veil. Then, taking Maravelli's hand, she led him forth with the same appearance of profound and mysterious precaution which she had observed when introducing him thither three-quarters of an hour previously.

Conducting him down the secret staircase, out of the villa, into the garden, she put in his hands a purse which gave forth that golden chink so pleasing to his ears, and at the same time she said to him, in a low whisper, " You have not been detained long."

" No," responded the doctor, in an equally subdued tone. " I should not mind having a similar adventure every night of my life."

They now continued to advance in silence. The gardens were threaded, and the back gate was reached. Mrs. Hubbard was not there. Mrs. Ranger and the doctor accordingly waited five minutes.

" Wherefore did we not bring the corpse with us? " he asked. " It would have been much better."

" I was fearful that if you should happen to be observed and an alarm should be created," responded Mrs. Ranger, " the most serious peril might ensue. But I have entrusted the child to a woman in whom I can rely. She will be here in a moment; she cannot possibly be long. Hark! I hear footsteps. Perhaps she cannot find her way through the darkness of the night. Stay you here; I will go and meet her."

Thus speaking, Mrs. Ranger relinquished the doctor's hand, and proceeded some twenty yards in the direction where she had heard footsteps moving. But just at the instant that a ray of moonshine gleamed from behind a cloud, shadowing forth her form cloaked and veiled as it

was, she was startled by an abrupt spring, as if a wild beast were bounding through the trees, and so suddenly was she seized upon by the strong arms of a man that a dread consternation paralyzed her very tongue, thus preventing her from giving utterance to the faintest cry. The next instant she was gagged by a piece of linen, or handkerchief, being thrust into her mouth. Then, quick as thought, the ruffian who had thus made her captive lifted her in his strong arms, and bore her as if she were a mere child to a garden seat that stood against the wall. On this he jumped with marvellous agility, and over the wall he at once tossed her as unceremoniously as if she were a bundle of rags. The shriek that sprang up in her throat was stifled by the gag thrust into her mouth, but instead of falling to the ground, she was caught in the arms of another individual, who at once scud along the road with his living burden to where a post-chaise was waiting at a little distance, and the outlines of which appeared to her view just as the moonbeams were vanishing again. The next moment and Mrs. Ranger was flung into the vehicle as coolly and comfortably as she had been ere now tossed over the wall, and on being thus tumbled headlong inside the chaise, she pitched against another female, who gave vent to a sudden ejaculation in the pain caused by the concussion.

"Heavens! 'tis you, Mrs. Hubbard?" said Mrs. Ranger, relieving herself from the gag the moment her hands were free again, for she instantaneously recognized the voice of the laundress. Then, in quick, breathless, and scarcely audible accents, she said, "But the child?"

"Dropped in the garden," responded Mrs. Hubbard, "when a coarse, wulgar furriner seized on me in the selvidgest manner possible and sent me flying over the wall jest for all the world like a battling-dore and shuttling-cock."

"Ah! 'twas the same with me," answered Mrs. Ranger. "But the child — what will happen now?"

"Gracious goodness on'y knows. Heavins, mem, what trouble you have brought me into!" and Mrs. Hubbard fell to moaning and sobbing as if her heart would break.

The preceding colloquy only occupied a few moments, and even if it had not been cut short by Mrs. Hubbard's whimpering, it would have been at the very same moment

by the entrance of one of the men into the vehicle. The door was then banged, his two companions leaped upon the box, the postilions cracked their whips, and away sped the equipage in the direction of the highroad leading to Lausanne.

Meanwhile, Doctor Maravelli, hearing the tread of several footsteps, the sounds of voices, and then the galloping off of a post-chaise along the road skirting the back of the villa, was seized with nervous misgivings, and finding that his veiled guide returned not, but that all was still around, he felt convinced that something most unexpected and mysterious had occurred, and not knowing to what dangers he himself might be exposed, he hastened to scale the wall and beat a precipitate retreat back to his own house at Geneva.

CHAPTER IV

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE FOURTH

It was about half-past two o'clock in the morning when the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas pushed their jaded steeds up the acclivitous steep of the main thoroughfare of Lausanne.

The night, or, rather, the morning, was pitch-dark, for the moon had totally disappeared, and the sky was curtained with masses of sable drapery, as if nature had hung the empyrean arch with a funeral pall. Nor did the dimly burning oil-lamps of Lausanne do much more than render that darkness visible. Nevertheless, without setting forth the salient features of the place, they served to guide our travellers to the hotel at which it had previously been arranged that they were to take up their quarters.

The porter of the establishment at once gave them admission, and as alacrity always prevails in a Continental hotel when Englishmen make their appearance, their repute being that of wealthy and liberal-paying travellers, the earl and the colonel had no difficulty in obtaining all requisite comforts even at that unseasonable hour. A groom was promptly in readiness to take charge of the horses, and a waiter was summoned to conduct them to an apartment, where a blazing fagot on the hearth, wax lights on the mantel, and a cold repast quickly spread upon the table, soon gave an air of luxurious comfort to a room which a few minutes before had been enwrapped in the darkness, the silence, and the chilliness of the hour.

These arrangements being made with that expedition for which Continental waiters in general and Swiss ones in particular are so remarkable, the earl proceeded to give a few hasty but clearly expressed instructions.

" Waiter," he said, slipping a couple of gold pieces into the man's hand, " listen to what I have to say. My friend and myself of course require bedchambers, to which we shall not, however, immediately repair. We wait the coming of a post-chaise containing two ladies and three men, who are serving as an escort to the said ladies. So soon as the carriage arrives, you will show the whole party up into this room, and in the interval you will direct that a bedchamber be provided for the two ladies, who are sisters, and therefore will occupy the same couch. As for the three men who are coming with them, they may shift for themselves, for I know not whether they will remain or whether they will take their prompt departure again. Now you understand. So bring up a couple of bottles of champagne, by the aid of which, together with this array of eatables, my friend and I will while away the time till the carriage comes."

The waiter bowed acquiescence to all the instructions he had just received, and having served the wine that was ordered, the discreet functionary took his station in the porter's lodge to await the coming of the post-chaise.

" Well," said Curzon, as he and Malpas sat down together at the supper-table after the door had closed behind the waiter, " this is indeed a night of mingled romance and excitement. It was eleven when we left Geneva, and it was half-past two as we set foot in Lausanne. Thirty miles in three hours and a half, with such horses as those, are no bad achievement."

" On the contrary, 'twas a famous ride," remarked Malpas, as he tossed off a bumper of champagne. " It will be at least an hour before the post-chaise arrives. But should you not have passed the girls off as our wives before that waiter to whom you ere now gave such elaborate instructions? "

" No such thing," exclaimed Curzon. " It is not by any means necessary to practise the least deception in the matter. Here we are safe at Lausanne, in the Canton of Vaud, and therefore completely out of the jurisdiction of the authorities of Geneva. Even suppose that any disturbance should have been created, any exposure caused, and any pursuit instituted, nothing could be done to us. In the same way that a man seeks refuge in France against the consequence of his little irregularities in England, so may we make sure

of impunity at Lausanne for this forcible abduction which we initiated at Geneva."

"I am well aware of all that you are saying," observed Malpas. "But for the credit of the girls themselves, we might as well have passed them off as our wives, whom we could represent as preferring the luxury of a chaise to our mode of travelling on horseback."

"And when the chaise does arrive," remarked Curzon, "the waiter would think that we entrusted our wives to three of the most hangdog-looking scoundrels that ever lived. But, upon my word, you seem to have a mighty great consideration all of a sudden for the fair fame of your Emma. Come, tell me candidly, did you ever care half so much for your own wife?"

"I do not pretend to care very particularly for Emma Owen," replied Malpas, "and as for my wife, I never cared much for her."

"Perhaps you have cared more for some other man's wife?" said Curzon, suddenly surveying the colonel in so strange a manner that he turned ghastly pale, trembled visibly, and, dropping his knife and fork, sat gazing on the earl with a half-stolid, half-frightened air.

"I — I — don't — that is, I can't exactly understand you," were the words he stammered forth in broken accents. "What do you mean, Curzon?"

"I mean just this, Malpas," said the earl, now adopting a resolute aspect and decisive tone, "that inasmuch as we shall most probably part in a few hours, you to journey in one direction along with your Emma, and I to take another in company with my Julia, we may as well have a word or two of mutual explanation."

"But I do not understand you," said Malpas, plucking up as much courage as he could possibly summon to his aid.

"Well, but you must suspect what I mean," exclaimed Curzon. Then, as he deliberately produced a brace of pistols from his pocket, he said, "These weapons, with which you urged me to provide myself as a means of protection during our journey, shall send a couple of bullets into your brain unless you answer me truly and faithfully in respect to certain matters wherein you can clear up the small amount of mystery that remains unsolved and unread by me."

"Curzon, you are jesting, you are joking," stammered Malpas, turning still more deadly pale than at first, and inasmuch as the muzzles of the pistols were pointblank toward him, he shifted his chair in such a manner as to place himself beyond the limit of their range.

"Silence, and do not interrupt me!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, in a stern voice. Then, resuming a deliberate and measured tone, he said, "For a month past you and I have been apparently upon friendly terms together, but believe me when I say that all the while there has been such a rankling, festering, irritating spirit within me that I have often loathed myself for thus being even commonly civil to one who — But no matter, we have not time for unnecessary comment, barely sufficient for requisite explanation. Once more listen, then. We are about to separate, and before we part you must tell me everything. I need not tell you what it is that I seek to know. Your very looks at this moment are a sufficient indication that you comprehend me full well. But this I may say, tell me everything, and I will allow you to go unhurt and scatheless. I will not avenge myself on you, provided you give me the means of avenging myself on another. For, mark you," continued the earl, whose feelings had been gradually growing excited while he was thus speaking, "my wife — Ah! now you start more visibly still as I thus allude to her."

"Go on, my lord, go on," said Malpas, most painfully anxious to arrive at the end of the colloquy, so that the pistols might disappear from the table.

"As I was saying, then," resumed the earl, now speaking hurriedly, as if he were also desirous to terminate the present scene, "my wife, the moment she hears of Julia Owen's elopement with me, will be taking active steps to obtain a divorce. But I must be beforehand with her. 'Tis I who must take the initiative, or if I should be forestalled in that respect, I must at all events be enabled to turn around and retaliate with a countercharge of adultery. Now, Colonel Malpas, you understand me, and no man in the world can better than yourself give me the information which I require. Once more, then, do I enjoin you to tell me everything, the whole history of your connection with my wife, from first to last, and on that condition alone will I spare you."

As he gave utterance to the concluding words of his speech, Lord Curzon took the pistols in his hands with a threatening demeanour; and then followed a scene of deep degradation, utter humiliation, and dastard compromise on the part of Colonel Malpas. He did indeed reveal everything, entering into the minutest details of his connection with the Countess of Curzon, confessing how Lady Lechmere's agency and Gertrude's artifice had served the progress of their intrigue, how Editha had given him the forged bills, how he had led her to explain the whole transaction at Mrs. Gale's house of infamy, while Emmerson was an unseen listener, and how, after his imprisonment in the King's Bench, his threats of exposure had extorted the sum necessary for his release. In a word, all those particulars which are so well known to the reader in respect to the colonel's amour with the Countess of Curzon were now revealed by the craven wretch. The earl listened calmly and tranquilly, putting frequent leading questions when Malpas hesitated, or actually dragging forth the replies when, through very shame or fear, he occasionally stopped short.

Some further conversation took place between the earl and the colonel, but which we need not now pause to relate. Suffice it to say that Lord Curzon was himself surprised at the comparative ease with which he had thus succeeded in working upon the fears of the dastard Malpas, and this circumstance suddenly prompted him to make a further use of the cowardly fellow's present ductility of humour. In fact, the earl had a certain lingering sentiment of curiosity to gratify, and it was natural enough that he should avail himself of the influence he had acquired over the colonel's fears in order to satisfy himself on this one remaining point.

" We have now said all that we need say," he observed, " relative to the worthless woman who bears the title of my wife." Then assuming the sternest expression of countenance and pointing both the pistols direct at Malpas, he said, " Now tell me, — and beware how you give utterance to a falsehood, — tell me I say, by what means you made your peace with Lady Sackville, who at one time was so terribly embittered against you."

" On issuing from prison," replied Malpas, grovelling like a coward in the presence of those pistols, the muzzles of

which were but three feet from his head, " I wrote to her a penitent letter imploring her pardon. She sent for me to Carlton House, she proposed to me this mission in which I am now engaged, a mission similar to your own — "

" But — and now answer me with the solemn serious truth," interrupted the earl, " did she receive you with favour, did she smile upon you? "

" No, no," responded Malpas, actually writhing as he beheld the earl's fingers playing, as it were, with the triggers of the pistols, " she treated me with scorn, she seemed to regard me as a reptile."

" Ah! that is sufficient," said the earl, lowering the pistols; and, his curiosity being gratified with regard to the subject of his inquiry, he muttered, half-audibly, " I see, I understand, she made a tool of you, she treated you as a hireling agent well fitted to do her dirty work. But she should not have placed me on the same footing," and the haughty Earl of Curzon bit his lip with an evident expression of vexation.

Although so profoundly a prey to his dastard fears, the colonel did not fail to catch those words and mark that mien on the part of the nobleman, and a suspicion of the real truth instantaneously flashed to his mind. It struck him, indeed, that the Earl of Curzon had received the lovely Venetia's favours; hence the inquiry he had just put relative to his connection with that charming creature, — an inquiry which evidently arose from mingled jealousy and curiosity; hence also those remarks which the earl had half-muttered to himself, and hence the vexation which he experienced on reflecting that he had likewise been used as a fitting agent for Venetia's dirty work.

Such were the reflections that swept through the colonel's brain, and no sooner had the truth thus flashed to his comprehension when he all in a moment saw the advantage that might be derived from a knowledge of this important secret.

Suddenly inspired, therefore, by one of those fits of courageous energy which selfish considerations will often excite even on the part of the craven and the poltroon, Malpas seized upon the pistols which the Earl of Curzon had just laid down again on the table.

" Now, then, my lord, it is my turn," he exclaimed, as

he levelled both the weapons pointblank at Curzon's head.

"Don't be a fool," said the nobleman, without losing his presence of mind, and even with a smile of disdain upon his lip.

"By Heaven!" exclaimed Malpas, "I will fire, unless you give me certain explanations in your turn. First, then, the secret of your connection with Lady Sackville —"

"You are mighty brave, all of a sudden, Malpas," interrupted the earl, eying the colonel with calm contempt, "but those pistols are not really loaded."

"Then in that case," cried Malpas, who was well assured of the contrary, for he felt convinced that the earl would not have encumbered himself with a pair of useless weapons, "in that case there will be no harm in my firing the pistols at you, just by way of amusement."

"Cease this jesting," said the earl, with a slight but perceptible change of countenance, and a simultaneous recoil from the muzzle of the pistols.

"Ah!" cried Malpas, in accents of triumph and assurance, "I see that they are loaded, and I take Heaven to witness that I will fire. For mark you, I am a desperate man, setting little value on life, because having little left to live for, and I will fire, then, unless you place yourself as much in my power as I have placed myself in yours. Say, then, the secret of your connection with Lady Sackville."

"She has made me her agent in the same way as she has done by you," responded Curzon, now really alarmed lest the colonel should be tempted by the frenzied excitement of opportunity to a fearful retaliation for the scene which had previously taken place.

"No, not merely her agent," ejaculated the colonel, his countenance growing more pale and his lips quivering more nervously through the effort which it cost him thus to display so much energy. "Not her agent, I say, but her lover. Confess the truth."

"Well, it is the truth," rejoined the earl, believing that Malpas had worked himself up to a pitch of excitement rendering him perfectly reckless and desperate.

"That is enough for me," said the colonel, and depositing the pistols upon the table, he instantaneously emptied a

tumbler of water over the priming, so that the weapons might not serve any further purpose of coercion.

At the same moment the sounds of a vehicle approaching up the acclivitous street reached their ears, and hastening each to a separate window, they beheld the expected post-chaise drive up to the door of the hotel. By the light of the street-lamps they observed two female figures alight from the interior of the carriage, and turning away from the casements, they fixed their eyes upon the room door, so as to be ready to welcome (as they thought) the fair ones whom they had caused to be so forcibly carried off.

In a couple of minutes that door was thrown open, and Kobolt made his appearance, exclaiming, "Now, at all events, ladies, any doubt upon the subject will be cleared up, and you shall see who is right."

"Cleared up — heavens! what does this mean?" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, as his eyes encountered two female forms which, though cloaked and veiled, were assuredly not those of Emma and Julia Owen.

Mrs. Ranger and Mrs. Hubbard at once threw up their veils, thus revealing their own antique and repulsive countenances, instead of the youthful and attractive features of the two charming sisters.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Earl of Curzon. "What mistake, what treachery is this?"

"These precious hags," cried Malpas, "are but poor substitutes —"

"There!" shrieked forth Mrs. Ranger, in accents of furious indignation, as she bent her looks upon Kobolt, speaking also in the French tongue, "I told you over and over again during the ride hither that there was some fearful mistake."

"Then the error rests not with me," replied the man, curtly, "for I followed the instructions I received to the very letter."

"Yes," added his two companions, who had followed close behind up into the apartment of the hotel, "these women were caught in the villa-gardens, each just where we had been led to expect them."

"My lord," Mrs. Ranger now hastened to observe, — for she knew the Earl of Curzon full well by sight, — "one

word. 'Tis clear you have committed, or, rather, caused to be perpetrated, a most unwarrantable outrage upon me and this good woman here. But if you will at once direct that we be conducted back to Geneva, we will consent to forgive not only yourself but also your accomplice there," — glancing toward Malpas, — " and your agents here," she added, turning toward Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden.

" For Heaven's sake, begone, then! " exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, and putting a number of gold pieces into Kobolt's hand, he said, " Depart, and undo your night's work as quickly as you have done it."

The next moment the room was cleared of all save the earl and Malpas, who once more found themselves alone together. For nearly a minute did they survey each other with an expression of countenance in which there was something ludicrous, for they both felt all the ridicule of their present position. But they exchanged not a word until the post-chaise had taken its departure, fresh horses having been procured, to retrace its way to Geneva.

" Now what is to be done? " demanded Colonel Malpas, at length breaking a silence which had lasted nearly half an hour.

" For my part," answered Curzon, doggedly, " I wash my hands of any further interference in the business."

With these words he rang the bell furiously, and on the waiter making his appearance, he said, in an imperious tone, " Conduct me to my chamber." Then, without taking any further notice of Malpas, he stalked out of the room.

The colonel likewise sought the couch prepared for him; and on awakening at a late hour in the forenoon, he inquired for the Earl of Curzon.

" Your companion, sir? " observed the domestic to whom the question was put. " Oh, he took his departure an hour ago for Berne."

" Ah! " thought Malpas to himself, " he doubtless means to get back to England as quick as possible, in order to tell a good story to Venetia, and 'tis ten to one that he will throw the whole blame of failure upon me. But I must forestall him, if possible. Waiter, a post-chaise and four immediately."

And in less than half an hour, Colonel Malpas likewise took his departure from Lausanne.

CHAPTER V

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE FIFTH

We must now return to Agatha's bedchamber at the villa in the suburbs of Geneva.

Mrs. Ranger, be it remembered, had left Emma and Julia by the bedside of their eldest sister, and as this young lady, who had just become the mother of a dead child, fell into a tranquil slumber, the other two sat silent, or else occasionally conversed in low whispers while watching by the invalid's couch.

An hour elapsed, and Mrs. Ranger did not return. Then another hour passed, and still she came not. Emma and Julia grew seriously alarmed. They were utterly at a loss to conjecture what could detain the old lady. Was it possible that some accident had befallen her? Had she been waylaid and maltreated, or perhaps murdered? They shuddered as they hazarded these surmises to each other; and as the time still kept slipping on and Mrs. Ranger reappeared not, the fears of the two girls became at length absolutely intolerable. Fortunately Agatha still slept on, thus remaining unconscious of the annoyance that was torturing her sisters.

The timepiece on the mantel proclaimed half-past two. Three hours had now elapsed since Mrs. Ranger took her departure with Doctor Maravelli. Suddenly Emma bethought herself of ascertaining whether Mrs. Hubbard had received any intimation from Mrs. Ranger of the probability of this prolonged absence on her part. To Mrs. Hubbard's apartment did Emma accordingly bend her stealthy steps in the dark. But the laundress was not there, nor had her bed been slept in during the night. Tortured with new terrors more agonizing and bewildering than the first alarms, Emma hastened to rejoin her sister

Julia, who became perfectly aghast on hearing that Mrs. Hubbard was not to be found. Conjecture became useless, almost impossible; it was utterly defied by the darkness of the mystery which enwrapped the ominous affair.

Still Agatha slept on, and this was at least fortunate for the two affrighted girls, who would have been loath indeed to communicate their terrors to their invalid sister. But still their own thoughts were harrowing to a degree. What was to be done? Were they to remain quietly and tranquilly in that chamber and allow things to take their course? No, it was impossible. The disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress seemed to be indicative of a thousand unknown dangers, and in the now feverish, excited, and nervous state to which Emma and Julia had been wrought up it seemed to them as if things would grow worse unless actually looked after by themselves.

"This torturing suspense can be endured no longer," whispered Emma. "I am resolved to go down into the garden and ascertain if I can hear anything of them, or even discover the slightest trace."

"But the night is dark as pitch," said Julia, drawing aside the window-curtain for a moment. "You cannot go forth alone, and I dare not accompany you, because Agatha must not be left."

"No, I do not wish you to go with me. You shall remain here," said Emma. "I will steal forth alone. Perhaps Maravelli himself has made away with Mrs. Ranger and the laundress, or perhaps they have been discovered by the police, with the corpse of the child — "

"O horror!" interrupted Julia, a cold tremor passing visibly over her form. "Conjecture may run riot amidst ten thousand dreadful things — But you must not leave me, Emma. If you did not come back, what on earth should I do?"

"What on earth will you do if I remain?" asked Emma. "Come, my dear sister, muster up all your courage; this is no season for faintness of heart. Remain you here with Agatha, while I will, at all events, descend into the garden, for I am now in one of those shocking humours that I feel I shall go mad with the agonies of suspense if I do not take some step toward the solution of this horrible mystery."

With these words Emma flung a reassuring glance upon

her sister Julia, and then stole forth from the room. The passage was, as we have before said, pitch-dark, Mrs. Ranger, be it remembered, having extinguished the lamp, but Emma had no difficulty in finding her way to her own chamber, where she hastily put on a cloak and bonnet. She then crept to the staircase, down which she stole noiselessly as a sprite.

Emerging forth from the back entrance of the villa, Emma paused for a moment as she found herself in the darkness, the silence, and the solitude of the spacious grounds in the rear of the dwelling. But, summoning all her fortitude to her aid, she sped forward along a well-known pathway. Shapes of terror, darker than the darkness, seemed to flit around her, and presently a shriek rose to the very tip of her tongue as she all of a sudden caught a glimpse of something white and shapely as a human form, that appeared to stand forth out of the surrounding obscurity. But the conviction flashed upon her mind that it was but one of the marble statues ornamenting the garden which had thus for a moment scared her, and passing the phantom-looking object quickly by, she felt her courage quickly revive again.

Every now and then she paused to listen, but no sound could she hear, save the moaning of the wind and the murmuring of the agitated waters of Lake Leman. Yes, the rustling of the leaves likewise did she hear, as the night-breeze sighed amidst the dewy verdure of the garden, and more than once she fancied that some one was about to rush forth upon her from amidst the trees. Lightly, too, as the tripped along, her footsteps raised echoes which fell upon her ear like the sounds of pursuit, and two or three times she turned abruptly around as if with the desperate resolution of facing some danger which she felt to be advancing from amidst the surrounding gloom. Ever and anon, too, an ice-chill like that of death would strike to her heart, as the idea struck her that a hand, heavy as that of the dead, was full likely to be laid upon her shoulder, and once or twice as an overhanging bough touched her she felt a sudden inclination to shriek out in the accents of intensest horror.

Thus, during the few minutes that it took the young lady to traverse the grounds from the back entrance of the villa to the door in the wall opening on the by-road, did she pass through a dozen different phases of exquisite agony, and on

gaining that door she leaned against it for some minutes while she collected her disordered thoughts.

And now she listened with breathless attention once more, but no sound indicative of human approach met her ears. Slowly she moved away from the door, passing along a gravel walk which ran parallel with the wall. At every dozen yards she stopped to listen, but all in vain, and she already began to reflect whether it would not be better to take a bold and desperate step at once, rather than remain a prey to such harrowing suspense as the disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress had excited. That step which she now began to revolve in her mind was neither more nor less than to proceed at once to Geneva, seek Doctor Maravelli's house, the address of which was known to her, and pursue her inquiries there. But at the very moment when she made up her mind to adopt this course, her foot struck against something that lay upon the footpath which she was pursuing. Whether it were a presentiment which seized upon her at the instant, or whether it were that the very nature of this contact with an object that felt soft as she kicked against it made her divine what it was, we cannot say. Certain it is that a cold shudder shook her from head to foot, making her shiver as if an ice-blast had suddenly shed its influence upon her, but still, with a horrible curiosity, she stooped down to feel for the object in the path. Stronger still was the quivering that now shot through her from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet as her hand came in contact with the cold cheek of a tiny corpse.

But all in a moment the superstitious portion of her fears gave way to the sense of a new and more real danger. That it was her sister's dead child she could not doubt, nor dared she wait to ask herself how it could possibly have been left there. There was not a moment to be lost; the infant corpse must be disposed of at once. But how and where? Should she dig a hole in the garden and bury it? No, for the gardener, when coming at daylight, might chance to observe the earth newly dug up, and discovery would then be certain. Far more prudent were it to consign the corpse of the child to the depths of the lake, and then she and her her sisters would at least have the consolation of knowing that the main evidence of the elder's shame was, as it were, annihilated.

The necessity for taking this step inspired Emma with the courage to carry it into execution. But how was she to issue forth from the grounds? If woman's wit, when sharpened by love, can laugh at locksmiths, so can her ingenuity when prompted by a sense of danger be rendered equally acute. It was true that the garden door was locked, but then did she not know that her sister Julia had been wont to meet Curzon at a particular spot where a wooden bench stood on the inner side of the wall and the stump of a tree on the outer side, and had she not often observed those convenient stepping-places? To be sure, and now, quick as thought, she availed herself thereof.

With the infant corpse under her arm, she scaled the wall and sped onward in the direction of the lake. A quarter of an hour's walk brought her to the shore, and pausing to listen, she could catch no sound of human voice or footstep. A leaden obscurity rested upon the lake, an obscurity which by the reflection that a large surface of water always throws up even in the midst of the darkest night, was a shade less sombre than the surrounding blackness. With straining eyes did Emma seek to plunge her looks along the shore, both on the right and left hand, to see if any one were approaching, but she could distinguish nothing. Believing, therefore, that the opportunity was entirely favourable, yet feeling like a guilty wretch who is perpetrating a first heinous crime, with trembling hands did she grope about for a large stone, and with her handkerchief she attached it to the corpse. Then, with all her force, assisted by a sudden access of moral energy, she hurled the burden as far as she could. It fell with a heavy plash, and the next instant her ears caught the gurgling sound of the miniature whirlpool produced by that tiny corpse sinking deep down to its watery sepulchre.

A feeling of relief sprang up in Emma's bosom; but scarcely had this sensation thus taken life, when it was turned into an almost mortal terror as a loud cry and a rush of footsteps burst forth from an old jetty a few yards off.

" Ah! caught at length! " were the words which, in accents of savage triumph and uttered in the strong tones of a male voice speaking in the French language, smote upon her ear, and in less than a minute she was surrounded by half a

dozen men whose swords rattled in their sheaths as they sprang toward her.

" Why, it is a woman! " ejaculated another of the civic guard, for police officers these individuals assuredly were. " It must be a mistake."

" Well, but did you not hear the splash? " exclaimed he who had first spoken, and who was the sergeant of the band. " At all events, let the young person give an account of herself, who she is, where she comes from, what she is doing here, and what made that noise a minute ago in the water."

" Officers," said Emma, driven by very desperation to the exercise of a fortitude the suddenness as well as the strength of which even surprised herself, " I am here with no evil intention. It was a whim, a fantasy, a caprice on my part," she continued, speaking in excellent French, " to ramble on the border of the lake at this hour; and as for the plashing sound which you heard, it was caused by a stone which in a listless mood I picked up and flung into the water."

" 'Tis a lady, by the tone of her voice and the language she uses," said one of the officers.

" The greater the reason, then," observed the sergeant, " that she should give a better account of herself. Ladies — that is to say, real ladies — don't come down here to walk at this time of night, or, rather, at such an hour in the morning. It is not at all probable, and though perhaps she is not one of those we have been waiting for, and perhaps has no connection with them, we must nevertheless take her before the night-commissary."

" What! " almost shrieked forth Emma, now smitten with the cruellest, the wildest, the most agonizing terror, " take me before a magistrate? "

" Yes, most assuredly," rejoined the sergeant of police. " What alternative have we? Come, my men, away with her! "

Emma saw in a moment that remonstrance with the sergeant and his functionaries would be all in vain, and indeed would only be calculated to enhance their suspicions against her, but she felt confident that from the courtesy of the Genevese magistrates she had everything favourable to expect. Once more recalling to her aid and hugging, as it were, the fortitude wherewith she had previously armed

herself, she said, in a tone of calmness that contrasted strongly and strangely with her wild ejaculation of a few moments back, " Since it is necessary that we go before a magistrate, I am willing to accompany you."

Away the party accordingly sped to the city, and in about a quarter of an hour they reached a police station where the " night-commissary," or magistrate whose turn it was to take the duty for the twelve current hours, was in attendance.

On being introduced into the common room of the station, Emma retained her veil carefully folded over her countenance, so as to avoid the curious gaze of the persons assembled there, but when she was conducted by the sergeant into the private room where the night-commissary sat, she immediately raised her veil in token of respect for that functionary.

The magistrate was somewhat startled at the revelation of such a charming countenance, and his eyes were at once turned upon the sergeant as if to inquire on what charge such a beautiful young lady could have been brought before him at such an hour.

" According to instructions received," said the sergeant, " I took half a dozen officers with me to keep a watch at that part of the lake where those rascally resurrectionists or fishers of men are in the habit of pursuing their avocation; because the old jetty causes a sort of tide to flow in at that part, and thus if there should happen to be a dead body in the lake, it is pretty sure to find its way to the spot I am speaking of — "

" Spare your details," interrupted the night-commissary, " and come to the point at once, — I mean your charge against this young lady."

" Well, sir, 'tis soon made," resumed the sergeant. " As I and my men lay concealed in the deep shade of the jetty, — although Heaven knows the night was dark enough everywhere, — we heard a sudden splash, and thinking it was the resurrectionists flinging in their drag-hooks, we rushed out and discovered the prisoner. As she refused to give any account of herself, I brought her here."

" So far," said Emma, who had listened with a forced calmness to the sergeant's explanations, even to that portion which touched so ominously upon dead bodies

finding their way into the hands of resurrectionists at the very spot where she had committed her sister's still-born child to the watery depths, "so far from not giving this officer a proper account of myself, I expressly told him that I had wandered forth in a strange and unaccountable mood for a solitary ramble on the border of the lake, and that it was in a listless, unpremeditated manner that I picked up a stone against which my foot struck and tossed it into the water."

"I admit that the lady gave me these explanations," observed the sergeant, "but I did not consider them satisfactory, especially as her name and address were studiously withheld."

"The officer has but done his duty," said the magistrate, addressing Emma in a mild and courteous tone. "Without offering any comment upon your explanation of this unseasonable ramble at so strange a spot, I shall at once allow you to depart upon your giving me some proof of your respectability."

"I have not the slightest objection," said Emma, without a moment's demur, "to give you my name and explain to you who I am and where I live. But inasmuch as an evil interpretation might be put on this very innocent proceeding of mine, — I mean my unseasonable ramble, — I need scarcely point out to you how much I am at your mercy relative to the amount of publicity you may give thereto. But throwing myself entirely on your generous consideration, I have no hesitation in confessing that my name is Emma Owen, and that I am one of the ladies belonging to the household of the Princess of Wales."

"This may be so, and I do not say that I doubt it," remarked the magistrate, "but still I must require some corroboration. Will you permit the sergeant to return with you to the villa inhabited by her Royal Highness the English princess? Or will you send for some tradesman with whom you deal to identify you?"

"Yes, I will adopt this latter course," said Emma, catching at the proposal.

Then, bethinking herself of a very civil and obliging linen-draper with whom she and her sisters had spent a tolerable amount of money, she at once gave his address. The sergeant lost no time in proceeding to the establishment

thus indicated, and arousing the linen-draper from his slumbers, he returned with him in about twenty minutes to the police station. There the tradesman at once identified Miss Owen, and the magistrate, expressing his satisfaction accordingly, proceeded to enter the minutes of the whole proceeding in the police book. Emma availed herself of the opportunity of the commissary's attention being thus engaged to slip a couple of pieces of gold into the sergeant's hand as an inducement for him to observe a profound silence relative to the singular adventure whereof she had just proved the heroine.

Thanking the magistrate for his courtesy toward her, Emma then took her departure, in company with the obliging linen-draper, who insisted upon escorting her back to the villa. On their way thither, the wily girl invented some excuse to account for the dilemma in which she had been involved, and as she concluded her readily invented tale with a request that her companion would send three of his most exquisite pieces of Swiss silk to the villa next day, he did not think it worth while to make any comment on the young lady's representations or criticize them at all closely.

When within a short distance of the villa, she took her leave of him, thanking him for his kindness and promising to obtain for him the exclusive custom of the princess during her stay at Geneva. The tradesman, overjoyed at an incident which promised such advantageous results, sped home again without a single regret at having been called up from his warm bed at such an hour.

It was now four o'clock in the morning, for Emma's absence had lasted exactly one hour and a half. It was quite light, and the bosom of the crescent lake reflected the pure azure of the heavens. Still the hillsides in the vicinage of the lake and the farther off ascents of mountains were veiled in the mists of morning, so that vineyards, hamlets, villas, and all the enchanting scenery belonging to that delightful region were clothed, as it were, in a gauzy dimness. But in the distance, far, far above those fleecy vapours, far far above the mountain-mists, towered the Alpine peaks, shadowed forth in the horizon like magnificent skeletons crowned with their diadems of eternal snow. And high above them all arose Mont Blanc, a giant amidst giants, a colossus making even the surrounding colossal heights seem

like pigmies, and looking like a pedestal on which the arch of heaven itself rested.

Yet little recked Emma for that sublime and wondrous panorama thus stretching itself out before her eyes. She was now full of anxiety how to obtain admission back into the villa. To scale the wall at the risk of being observed from the casements of the dwelling, or by the gardener himself, was impossible. To go boldly around to the front door and knock for admittance, as if she were returning from an early ramble, would be to create an immediate suspicion as to how she could have gone forth. For a few minutes she felt completely bewildered, when, to her joy, she observed the gardener coming forth with a wheelbarrow full of rubbish from the door in the boundary-wall. Watching till he was at a convenient distance, she glided through that doorway into the grounds, and then boldly traversed them with the air of one who was merely taking an early walk.

No one however, perceived her, and thus, without encountering a soul, did she reënter the villa, ascend the back staircase, and steal her way, unobserved, to her sister Agatha's chamber.

Meanwhile Julia had been suffering indescribable torture on account of Emma's prolonged absence. But fortunately Agatha had slept on the whole time, and she was only now awakened by the return of Emma into the chamber. Slipping off her cloak and bonnet, Emma made a sign for Julia not to enter upon any disagreeable communication to Agatha, it being absolutely necessary that she should experience no annoyance or shock to impede her progress toward a speedy convalescence. It was not, therefore, until Agatha fell into a sound slumber again, which she did in about half an hour, that Emma had an opportunity of explaining to Julia all that had occurred during her brief but momentous absence. And now conjecture was again rife with the two girls to account for the prolonged disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress, and the circumstance of the child having been dropped in the garden.

But we need not dwell upon the many hypotheses which Emma and Julia conjured up to account for those things which it was quite impossible could be thus accounted for by any surmise on their part. Hour after hour passed. They made themselves some breakfast, and they performed

copious ablutions to bring back to their cheeks the roses which this long vigil and sleepless night had chased thence. At length, as the timepiece struck eight, the door of the chamber opened, and the lost Mrs. Ranger made her appearance.

She and Mrs. Hubbard had just returned from their forced expedition to Lausanne, and being set down by the post-chaise at a short distance from the villa, they had entered its precincts separately, and without attracting any particular attention on the part of the menials who were by this time all bustling about.

Many and varied, strange and exciting also, were the mutual explanations which now took place. Mrs. Ranger told her story first, and it was thence evident enough that Curzon and Malpas had intended the forcible abduction of Emma and Julia, for whom Mrs. Ranger and Mrs. Hubbard had been so ludicrously mistaken. The circumstance of the child being found in the garden by Emma was now also fully accounted for, and, on the other hand, Mrs. Ranger was relieved of a poignant source of alarm on hearing that the infant corpse, instead of being left in the grounds, had been consigned to the bottom of the lake. In a word, it was agreed by the two young ladies and the old one, when all these explanations were concluded, that neither in truthful history nor in fictitious romance had a night ever occurred so full of varied, strange, and exciting adventures as the one that had just passed.

" But Mrs. Hubbard? " said Julia, interrogatively, " what does she think now? What must she suspect? "

" She suspects nothing that we do not wish her to suspect," answered Mrs. Ranger. " In the first place, her ignorance of the French language prevented her from understanding anything that took place between me and the villain, whose name appears to be Kobolt, during the journey to Lausanne and back again hither. Moreover, when we found ourselves face to face with Curzon and Malpas at Lausanne, I so promptly stopped any unnecessary explanation that Mrs. Hubbard gleaned not from their lips how it was yourselves, my dear Emma and Julia, whom they had intended to have carried off. The result is that Mrs. Hubbard has come back no wiser then she went relative to anything which we do not wish her to know. As for inventing some feasible expla-

nation for the outrage thus perpetrated upon herself and me, and also for devising a motive to induce her to maintain a strict silence upon the subject — "

" Oh, we can trust you, my dear Mrs. Ranger, upon all those points," exclaimed Emma. " And though you and I have lost our lovers, Julia," she added, turning to her sister in a laughing manner, " we must congratulate ourselves on the turn which events have taken."

A few hours later, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was surrounded, as usual, in her breakfast-parlour, by her six ladies in waiting. Yes, there was not even an exception on this occasion with regard to Agatha Owen. Although but twelve hours had elapsed since she had experienced the pains of maternity, yet did she leave her couch, assume an elegant apparel, and appear in her accustomed place about the person of the Princess of Wales. But then the stimulant which Mrs. Ranger had given her was of such sovereign effect and invigorating qualities, the hand, too, of Mrs. Ranger had so skilfully applied an artificial shade of bloom to the young lady's pale cheeks, and the arrangements of her toilet were so well combined to prevent the appearance of any diminution in her shape, that it would have been impossible for even the most scrutinizing observer to entertain a suspicion of what had befallen Agatha within the last four and twenty hours.

Here, then, may we drop the curtain upon the fifth act of this drama of a night.

CHAPTER VI

THE AVOWAL OF LOVE

We must now again transport the reader's attention back to the English capital, the huge Babylon where millions of interests are ever jarring, where, notwithstanding a much-vaunted freedom, might is ever trampling upon right, and, with all its boasted civilization, society exhibits the barbarism of the industrious many being beggared to maintain the favoured few in luxurious indolence.

Yes, this is the city where the most tremendous anomalies, the most striking contrasts, and the most amazing inconsistencies cannot fail to arrest the gaze and rivet the attention. There worthlessness and immorality are seen in palaces, in mansions, at luxurious banquets, and in gilded equipages, while integrity and virtue are crushed unto the earth, trampled into the dust, forced into contact with crime, doomed to have their very nature changed, and then plunged into the workhouse or the gaol. There, in that modern Babylon, is the false god set up which three thousand years ago the king of ancient Babylon ventured to erect in the plain of Dura, — that golden image which doubtless represented Mammon then and bears the name of Mammon now, and which all kneel down and worship of their own accord and without any bidding. Here, too, in this grand and mighty London of ours, which Britons proclaim to be not merely the metropolis of their own land, but of the entire world, here, in this city, where art the most exquisite, science the most refined, discovery the most strange, and ingenuity the most persevering are ever multiplying their marvels, and heaping up wonder upon wonder, here is society cursed with the foulest moral leprosy that ever tyrannical institutions, infamous laws, and execrable social

systems inflicted upon a community calling itself civilized.

But to our tale. About the same time that the events of the last few chapters were occurring on the shores of Lake Leman, the following scene took place at the mansion of Lord and Lady Florimel in Piccadilly.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and in the splendid drawing-room of that palatial residence sat Florence Eaton and Valentine Malvern.

The young lady was engaged in some elegant fancy work, while the young gentleman was conversing with her, not in the frivolous style so common in aristocratic circles, nor upon the vanities, gaieties, and dissipations of the great metropolis. They were not discussing the attractions of the opera, nor the merits of the newest piece produced at Covent Garden, nor the last brilliant party given by some splendid duchess, nor the tittle-tattle, scandal, and flying rumours at that particular period constituting the "nine days' wonder" of the fashionable world. But that maiden so lovely and that youth so handsome were conversing on subjects which, if not gay, were at all events not too grave, and if far from frivolous and light, were equally distant from being ponderous and dull. For the topics of their discourse were poetry, music, painting, and sculpture, and in exchanging their remarks thereon they showed no affected love for something which they could not understand, but a pure taste and a sound judgment in the appreciation of all the beauties of those sublime arts.

Upwards of four months had elapsed since Valentine Malvern, when thrown from his horse in Hyde Park, was conveyed in an unconscious state to Florimel House in Piccadilly. The physicians who were summoned at the time ordered that he should be kept as tranquil as possible, lest concussion of the brain might supervene. Thereupon the hospitality of Lord Florimel, exercised with the due assent of his amiable Pauline, was so generously manifested toward the invalid that for upwards of a month did he remain beneath that roof. His recovery, indeed, was somewhat slow, as he had received a very severe shock from the accident, nor would Lord Florimel hear of his new friend leaving Piccadilly and returning to Hanover Square until the medical attendant pronounced him convalescent.

As a matter of course, an acquaintance commenced under such circumstances was not likely to be disregarded by those concerned. Indeed, it was an acquaintance of the kind which, with congenial dispositions, soon ripens into friendship, and thus was it that an intimacy sprang up between Valentine Malvern and the Florimel family. His lordship and Pauline soon became much interested in this young gentleman, whose handsome countenance wore the impress of early sorrows, and whose disposition, naturally studious and thoughtful, was prematurely tinged with a melancholy shade. On the other hand, Valentine himself soon experienced a sincere admiration and profound respect for this noble couple, whose affections were so thoroughly centred in each other, and who after so many years of marriage seemed lovers still.

But we must not forget to state — and, indeed, the very progress of our tale requires that we should mention — the impression which Valentine Malvern and Florence Eaton made upon each other. In this young maiden of nineteen did Valentine behold the personification of all the sweetest attributes belonging unto woman. He found her endowed with a personal beauty the rarest, the most interesting, while of all the mental charms that can possibly ornament her sex those of Florence were the truest, the choicest, and the best. On the other hand, though innocent as an angel and artless as the infant child, pure and spotless in soul as she was stainless and bright in her Madonna-like beauty, she could not remain insensible to the handsome person, the pleasing manners, the intellectual qualities, and the sterling virtues of Valentine Malvern. She beheld him mournful and unhappy on account of his father's still incomprehensible disappearance, and she naturally felt interested in one who, though of an age when the world's sunlight usually dissipates even the darkest clouds that gather around the heart, gave himself up to the absorbing fervour of that filial piety with which he continued to revere a lost parent's memory.

During the four months, then, that had now elapsed since Valentine Malvern first became acquainted with the Florimels, there had been ample leisure and full opportunity for himself and Florence Eaton to know, to understand, and to like each other. The maiden's aunt and uncle be-

held the progress of this affection between the young couple, and though they did nothing to encourage it, they were likewise careful against impeding its development. They had already resolved that whenever the time came for their well-beloved niece to enter the matrimonial sphere, the merits and not the rank, the virtues and not the social position of him on whom her affections might rest, should be taken into consideration. Therefore, when Florimel and Pauline observed that Florence was disposed to give her heart to a young man who not only possessed every mental qualification, but the advantages of rank and fortune into the bargain, they rejoiced unfeignedly. It was in secret, however, that they thus rejoiced, for they were resolved to allow their niece's attachment to take its own course, so that she might not, by receiving encouragement from them, prematurely assume that her liking was in reality a love.

But at the end of the four months of their acquaintance, Valentine Malvern, in a frank and candid manner, sought an opportunity of communicating to Lord and Lady Florimel the affection which he entertained toward their lovely niece. In thus revealing to them, in the first instance, the state of his feelings, he was actuated by the most honourable of motives, namely, to ascertain from them whether it would be agreeable that he should propose himself to the Honourable Miss Florence Eaton as a suitor for her hand. Lord and Lady Florimel at once expressed their full concurrence therein, and the circumstance of the reader's now finding the young gentleman and the youthful maiden alone together in the drawing-room was in truth the opportunity which the uncle and aunt had purposely afforded for the avowal of love.

We said that during the first portion of this interview the conversation had dwelt upon those subjects which are the recreation of the truly healthful mind. But gradually did Valentine turn the discourse into that channel which was to bring to an issue the subject he had nearest and dearest at heart. Unconscious was the sweet Florence, in her girlish innocence, of the point to which her companion's remarks were at length tending, but when, with a due amount of delicate preparation and suitable preface, he ushered in the tender topic, oh, how her heart began to palpitate in her bosom like a bird fluttering in its cage, how

the roseate hue went and came upon her damask cheeks, and how strangely, almost overpoweringly, streamed forth upon her comprehension the floods of light from that temple of love the portals of which were now unfolding to her knowledge!

And then, oh, then, how ravishingly beautiful appeared the damsel in this moment when a new source of happiness became known to her, when she understood the meaning of those sentiments that hitherto she had cherished unconsciously and unwittingly toward Valentine, and when her pure but enthusiastic soul was thus suddenly brought to a more vivid and rapturous comprehension than ever she had experienced before of that æsthetic feeling which the poet has embodied in his verse, the painter has made to glow on his canvas, the sculptor has personified in his almost breathing statue, and the musician has sent soaring up to heaven on the wings of divinest melody.

" Miss Eaton," said the young man, in those hushed and tremulous accents which, when vibrating with a masculine harmony and conveying the language of love no young female can hear with impunity, " it is by the permission of your excellent uncle and aunt that I am thus permitted to address you. I do not fall at your feet, I do not give vent to impassioned language, full of vows, and pledges, and protestations, but not the less inspired with the deepest feeling and experiencing the profoundest emotion, I beg to offer you my hand as you already possess my heart."

With downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, Florence Eaton proffered her own fair hand, thus mutely, yet, oh, how eloquently, giving the affirmative answer to the suit which he had pleaded in terms so manly but in tones so tender.

" Thanks, ten thousand thanks, dearest, dearest young lady," said Malvern, as he took that fair hand and respectfully conveyed it to his lips, but though there was bashful hesitation in the manner in which he thus kissed the maiden's hand, there was nevertheless a thrill of ecstatic rapture in the accents wherein he conveyed his gratitude for the bestowal of it. " Florence," he continued, now calling her by her Christian name for the first time, " again and again I thank thee."

How sweet, oh, how sweet to the maiden's ear is her own Christian name when breathed for the first time by the lips

of one who has just revealed the love that inspires his heart. Oh, the world has no happiness to compare with this. The most delicious music is dull and vapid in comparison with the melody of the lover's voice when softly syllabling the name of the adored one. Deep, deep into the soul it sinks, not with a force that jars upon the tender chords of the heart, but gentle and tender, as the balmy breeze laden with the perfume of roses steals upon the strings of an Æolian harp, awakening all the delicious pathos of its murmuring melody.

" You thank me for placing this hand in yours," said Florence, after a long pause and with a look of innocent fondness flung hastily upon her lover, " but have I not also to thank you for thus selecting me from the many ladies of your acquaintance — "

" No, no," interrupted Valentine, with much concentrated enthusiasm in his tone, " 'tis I who owe all the debt of gratitude unto you, for, without flattery and without compliment, 'tis an angel that thus promises herself to a humble mortal."

In the strain which is usual with lovers in the first hour of their affection's avowal did Valentine and Florence continue to discourse for some time, and at length the young man found himself touching upon a subject which stole in, as it were, painfully and darkly amidst his present dream of bliss, but on which he nevertheless deemed it requisite to deliver a few comments.

" You are aware, my dear Florence," he said, " that not a year has elapsed since the extraordinary and still unaccountable disappearance of my father. You behold me in mourning, because I believe him to be dead. Indeed, what circumstance save his death could possibly prove the solution of the present mystery? In the vigour of his manhood, endowed with all the choicest gifts of fortune, surrounded by affectionate friends, and having everything to render life agreeable, it is not for a moment to be believed that he could have voluntarily expatriated himself. The same reasons argue with equal strength against the supposition that he could have accomplished his self-destruction. What, then, must I suppose? Either that he met his death by accident, or that he was foully dealt with. But if it were indeed an accident, some trace would have survived, some

clue would have remained, and none has ever been found. Alas! on what belief, then, must my conjectures settle? You can well understand, my dear Florence, how under such circumstances I am inspired by an ardent longing, a deep, unappeasable yearning, to discover the author or authors of this dreadful crime, if such a crime have in reality been perpetrated. Therefore, in offering you my hand, it is requisite I should explain to you that although your image will ever henceforth be uppermost on the bright side of my thoughts, yet on the dark side will remain the memory of that sire whose blood seems to be crying up from some unknown spot for vengeance on those who shed it. Tell me, then, will you accept as your husband one whose thoughts will be thus to some extent divided, one who at any moment may have to rush away from your sweet society, to follow up some new track, some fresh clue that may develop itself? "

" Continue not this painful topic," said Florence, in a tremulous voice and with tears trickling down her cheeks. " The feelings which inspire you relative to your father are most honourable, most admirable, and when it shall be my happiness to become your wife," she added, with blushing cheeks, " it will be my duty to encourage you in this filial research to which you have devoted yourself. Yes, and also to succour you in it to the utmost of my power."

" Words cannot express the gratitude I feel toward you, Florence, for these assurances," said Valentine. " In the midst of the sorrow which has enveloped me, as it were, in a cloud, you have been sent to irradiate my path and cheer me with your angel presence. Pardon me, oh, pardon me, if I have now by this conversation infused into your mind some of that gloom which hangs about my own soul, but I could not, I dared not, conceal a single thought nor a single feeling at a moment when our hearts should be revealed to each other and the fullest confidence should subsist between us."

" Yes, we should indeed mutually make known all our secrets," said Florence, suddenly becoming pensive and even melancholy, so that Malvern instantaneously perceived it was a mournfulness apart from that which his own language had a few minutes before been calculated to inspire. " Yes," she again observed, in a musing manner and with deepening pensiveness, " there must be no secrets between us, and

therefore shall I unveil my thoughts upon a certain subject — "

She paused, and for a moment Valentine Malvern gazed upon her with surprise and curiosity, for he was naturally at a loss to conjecture what secret could be cherished in the bosom of a maiden who was not only so artless and so innocent, but who had likewise come so little in contact with the world.

" Ah! I perceive that you are already astonished at my words," said Florence, in a gayer tone, but yet with a half-subdued sigh, " and when I explain myself, you will doubtless think that I am very foolish, perhaps very wrong, to allow the incident to which I allude to produce such an impression upon my mind. But in a few words can I explain myself."

Malvern was evidently listening with the utmost attention, and Florence proceeded in the following manner:

" Four months have elapsed since the occurrence of which I am about to speak. At that time my aunt took me to St. James's Palace to view the State Apartments. In the Royal Closet we accidentally encountered the prince regent, who immediately appeared strangely excited on beholding me. Suddenly drawing forth a small miniature, he gazed upon it with a mingled melancholy and tenderness that I never can forget. It also seemed as if there were something like the agony of remorse in that expression which thus swept over his countenance, and methought that he compared the portrait which so deeply moved him with my features. I felt amazed, and even startled, and feelings so strange and unaccountable that I cannot possibly describe them sprang up in my soul. The prince took my hand and said, ' Pardon me, pardon me, young lady, but you suddenly reminded me of a dear friend now no more.' The words, as well as the look that accompanied them, have remained indelibly impressed upon my memory. At the time they filled me with confusion, and almost overwhelmed me with dismay, for the hand of the prince trembled violently as he held mine, and he gazed upon me as if actually asking pardon for some fault which he had committed, or some injury that he had done me. I forgot at the moment that he was a prince, and the feeling of awe inspired by his rank being thus temporarily suspended, I experienced a sudden but boundless

compassion for that being who regarded me in such a manner. My aunt hurried me away to the Princess Sophia's apartments. We soon afterward entered the carriage and drove into Hyde Park, on which occasion it was that the accident occurred to yourself. From that day forth my aunt has never once alluded to the scene at St. James's Palace, nor have I mentioned it in her hearing. But I have nevertheless thought of it, yes, and thought of it often. It steals into my waking reflections by day, and mingles with my dreams by night. It appears to have interwoven itself with the threads of my destiny. Frequently do I reason with myself on the folly of thus attaching importance to an incident which was explained at the time, namely, my resemblance to a deceased friend of the prince having so deeply moved him. But vainly do I thus reason. A mysterious voice seems to whisper in the profundities of my soul that there is an importance attached to that incident, and that its solution is otherwise than was represented. This idea has grown upon me, it has settled itself in my mind, — it has become a conviction against which no self-reasoning on my part can wrestle. Doubtless you will blame me, you will consider me to be very foolish."

"Not so, Florence," observed Valentine, who had listened with the deepest interest to the strange but artless narrative which the young maiden had delivered with such frankness and candour. "The incident to which you have alluded has evidently made a strong impression on your mind. Indeed, it has acquired the power of a spell or a superstition over you, and therefore your feelings are entitled to the utmost respect, especially on the part of one who aspires to the possession of your hand. But think you not that if the occurrence had really possessed any important significancy, beyond what it appeared to have, think you not, I ask, that your aunt, who is all goodness and all kindness, would have cleared up the mystery to you?"

"Alas!" said Florence, shaking her head mournfully, and with the tears starting forth on her long lashes, "there are moments when I have experienced ungenerous and rebellious thoughts against my excellent aunt, that is to say, I have fancied that her silence relative to the incident at the palace has been a studied one, and that she has some special motive for avoiding all allusion thereto. If it were

not for these ideas, which at times haunt me like darksome suspicions, I should have revealed to the ears of my aunt the thoughts and sensations which I have now revealed to you. I should have thrown myself into her arms and explained the wild, the singular, and the mysterious impressions which that incident has left upon my memory. But I dare not thus touch upon the subject before my aunt, — a subject which methinks she studiously avoids; and for some weeks past a damp has fallen at times upon my spirits when I reflect that I am cherishing a secret unknown to those kind and generous relatives to whom I am so incalculably indebted."

"The revelation you have now made gives me pain, Florence," said Valentine, "because I understand full well that this secret is preying upon you. You must endeavour to banish the impression from your mind — "

"No, that is impossible," interrupted Florence, with accents of mournful firmness. "You have a belief that your lamented father has been the victim of a crime, and you cherish the presentiment that sooner or later you will be enabled to clear up the mystery. On my part I have a belief that the incident of St. James's Palace is in some manner interwoven with my destiny, and I cherish the presentiment that time will afford a full and complete explanation. Ah! Valentine," she said, after a few moments' deep reflection, and now suddenly fixing her eyes, those lovely azure eyes, upon the handsome youth who sat by her side, retaining one of her fair hands in his own, "when you ere now spoke to me of your desire to unravel the mystery which occupies so large a portion of your thoughts, did I not declare that to the extent of my humble ability, weak, timid, and powerless girl that I am, I would assist you?"

"Oh, dearest Florence, now I comprehend you," exclaimed Valentine. "You wish that I should reciprocate the pledge, and that I should do my best to clear up this mystery which envelops the incident of the palace, if a mystery there really be? I will do so, I will do so."

The young maiden bent upon her lover a look beaming with gratitude, and they immediately turned their discourse upon topics of a more cheerful character.

CHAPTER VII

VENETIA AND HER AGENT

About ten days after the incidents which we have just related, and as the delicious month of April was verging toward a close, the last of a series of private dramatic performances was to take place at Carlton House.

Accordingly, between seven and eight o'clock on a certain evening, we shall find the beautiful Venetia dressing in her own chamber for the part which she was to take in the drama. The tasteful Jessica and another maid assisted at this toilet, which was so well calculated to display the grand and voluptuous charms of Lady Sackville to their fullest advantage. We need not, however, linger to describe her personal appearance on the occasion. Suffice it to say that she wore her auburn hair showering in ringlets over her naked shoulders so dazzlingly white, and that some natural flowers were the only ornament which appeared upon those Hyperion locks. Her drapery, gauzy and transparent, low in the body and short in the skirt, revealed the luxuriance of her bust and all the symmetry of her limbs. Her arms were naked; and thus was the brilliant Venetia dressed, or, rather, undressed, in a manner the most voluptuous and the most provocative.

It was half-past seven, and the performances were to commence at eight. Her toilet was thus achieved in good time, and when it was completed she dismissed her maids and sat down to cast a look over her written part. But not many minutes did she remain thus alone, for Jessica reappeared with the announcement that Colonel Malpas was in the drawing-room and requested an immediate interview.

"Ah!" ejaculated Venetia, "he is returned, then, and I will see him, if only for a few minutes."

She accordingly issued from her chamber and repaired to the drawing-room belonging to the suite of apartments which she and her husband occupied at Carlton House. In such haste was she to see the colonel and hear from his lips the issue of his mission upon the Continent, that she quite forgot at the moment the manner in which she was apparelled, and it was not until she actually stood in his presence and observed his eyes suddenly light up with a look of fervid devouring passion as she thus burst upon his sight, that she remembered how lightly she was clad. But being thus accustomed to display herself in those private dramatic representations wherein all the sensualities of the public stage were so shamelessly imitated, she experienced no bashfulness as the circumstance of her seminudity was thus recalled to her mind. Indeed, she could not be disposed to experience any more shame in thus displaying herself to the eyes of Malpas than she did when appearing on the mimic stage before her select patrician audience.

The effect, however, thus produced upon Colonel Malpas was as powerful as it was instantaneous. The sudden appearance of that woman so superbly handsome, in such a luxurious undress and in the roseate light which flooded the splendidly furnished drawing-room, was enough to arouse the passions of even a more sober-minded individual than Malpas and excite them to a frenzied degree. He had always regarded her as supremely beautiful, from the very first; he had looked upon her as the most desirable creature he had ever set eyes upon, but now she seemed to burst upon his view clothed with a loveliness so transcending in its brilliancy, so overpowering in its grandeur, so intoxicating in its influence, that small marvel was it if the fires of the colonel's sensual cravings thus flamed up all in a moment to a maddening degree.

"Sit down, Colonel Malpas," said Venetia, immediately assuming an aspect of dignified reserve as she waved her hand toward a seat. Then placing herself on a sofa at a little distance, she hastened to observe, "We have private theatricals here this evening, and hence the garb which doubtless strikes you as strange."

"Not strange, your ladyship, but as wondrously becoming," said the colonel, in a tone insidiously complimentary. "To speak with candour, indeed, I never saw your ladyship

to such advantage before, so dazzlingly handsome, so exquisitely charming — "

"Enough, sir," exclaimed Venetia, her countenance flushing with indignation; but as the crimson tide not only mantled upon her cheeks, but also poured over her softly rounded shoulders and her heaving bosom, she looked all the more grandly beautiful, and the colonel's passions were excited if possible to a more frenzied pitch. "Our interview must on the present occasion be brief," she continued, in a tone that was intended to overawe the colonel, and make him feel that though she had used him as the agent of her schemes, she utterly hated and despised him. "Tell me, therefore, in a word, what you have done, and to-morrow you can call again and give me the details."

"I am sorry to inform your ladyship that I have done nothing effective," answered Malpas.

"Nothing!" echoed Venetia, with mingled surprise and indignation, "absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing, my lady, absolutely nothing," responded Malpas, not adopting so humble a tone as when he was last in her presence. "I shall not attempt to deceive you, and therefore I must at once confess that in spite of all the various plans and manœuvres I adopted, nothing has been done."

"And yet," exclaimed Venetia, now appearing pale with anger not only at this acknowledgment of utter failure on the colonel's part, but likewise because she noticed a sort of flippancy and assurance in his tone which she was not altogether at a loss to understand, "and yet in your letters you assured me that one of the Owens had become your mistress."

"True enough, my lady," rejoined the colonel, "but equally true it is that so far from my being able to make use of that connection in a manner serviceable to the objects of my mission, I do really believe that I myself was rendered a dupe and an instrument by the young lady. To be brief, Lord Curzon — "

"Ah! you have met, then?" exclaimed Venetia; but, instantly recovering her presence of mind, she said, "Proceed. I was interrupting you."

"Well, the truth is soon told, Lady Sackville," said Colonel Malpas, with increasing assurance alike of tone and manner. "Lord Curzon and I did meet at Geneva, and we

became as good friends as ever. In fact, there was a complete understanding established between us."

"That is to say," remarked Venetia, in a cold tone, but subduing her rage and vexation only with a most powerful effort, "that is to say, you revealed to his lordship the object of your mission as well as the name of her who sent you, and he gave you a similar explanation. Was it not so?"

"It was," answered Malpas and now his eyes actually flamed as they dwelt devouringly and gloatingly upon the splendid person of Venetia.

"I ought to have foreseen that they would have thus met," she thought within herself. "But, after all, no harm can possibly result from such an encounter. Curzon would not have betrayed his intimacy with me." Then suddenly casting her eyes upon Malpas and observing the unmistakable longings of desire that glowed in his looks, she said, with a haughty dignity, "You will be so kind as to call upon me to-morrow at noon, and we will converse further upon these matters."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Sackville," said Colonel Malpas, suddenly assuming a tone and manner of insolent assurance and dogged authority, "there is no time like the present, for when I come to-morrow, it is just as likely as not that the hall porter will declare your ladyship to be invisible. I dare say you have five minutes to spare. In that five minutes all can be said that need be said."

From the first moment of Venetia entering that drawing-room upon the present occasion, her eyes had lost the amorous languor which was habitually wont to fill them and partially to weigh down the thickly fringed lids. But gradually as Malpas proceeded with this last speech, in which he so completely threw off the mask, and not merely hurled defiance at the lady, but seemed to feel a consciousness of power over her, the steady calmness that had displaced the languor of her gaze flamed up into a burning look which flung its vivid lightnings upon the man who thus dared to insult her.

"You appear more gloriously handsome than ever," said Colonel Malpas, wincing somewhat for a moment before that blaze of wrathful feeling; but recollecting that, after all, it was but a woman against whom he was now waging war, he became valorous once more. "A few minutes back,"

he continued, " you looked as calmly dignified and as elegantly stately as the Goddess Diana, but now you seem superb and terrible as Juno the queen of heaven."

" Leave the room, sir," exclaimed Venetia, rising from her seat and catching hold of the bell-cord. " Remain another instant and I summon the lackeys to thrust you forth."

" Ah! would you dare heap insults on me again? " cried Malpas, also springing from his chair. Then, with a look of malignant triumph, he said, " Madam, you are in my power, utterly in my power, and you would do well to come to terms with me."

" In your power, sir! It is ridiculous! " ejaculated Venetia, in a tone of scorn and with a look of withering indignation, but still she did not pull the bell, for she felt that she was not standing on the securest ground possible in respect to Malpas. " You doubtless think," she continued to observe, " that because I have entrusted you with a delicate and secret mission you have acquired a certain authority over me, and you imagine to work upon my fears? "

" You speak the exact truth," said Malpas, " and remember that if we have now come to serious language, it is your ladyship who has provoked it."

" Penniless, wretched, and miserable," said Venetia, in a bitter tone, " did you issue from a debtor's gaol, and the first person to whom you applied was the very last to whom you should have so addressed yourself. Nevertheless, I took you by the hand, I gave you employment, I put gold into vour pocket, and now you seek to turn around upon me, viper that you are. But I will trample you beneath my heel, I will crush you as I would a worm, I will cover you with confusion, infamy, and disgrace."

As Venetia thus spoke, her form seemed to dilate, her stature heightened, her bust expanded, her cheeks mantled with the deepest carnation, her eyes vibrated like stars, her beauty became alike grand and terrible.

" Oh, since you treat the matter thus," said Malpas, " let us understand each other. Think you that I have ever forgotten, or could have ever forgiven, the tremendous exposure which took place when the Banquet of Six was given at my house? No, by heavens, it was a barbed arrow that rankled

in my heart. And yet I never thought, I never even ventured to hope, that the day would come when I should be avenged. It did not seem possible that such good fortune was in store for me. On issuing from prison, I addressed myself to you in my despair, but it was not through friendship, no, not even with so beggarly a feeling as charity, that you condescended to return a favourable answer to my petition. You wanted an individual who was to become your instrument, your tool, your cat's-paw in playing a certain game in the affairs of the Princess of Wales. What your object was, Heaven only knows, and I care not. Suffice it for me to say that I am so deep in your confidence as to hold you completely in my power — "

" Ah! think you," interrupted Venetia, who had listened with glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, and scornful lips to the colonel's long speech, " think you that I reck for these implied menaces on your part? Do I not know that gold is all you require, and that your present proceeding is nought but a scandalous mode of extortion? Having failed in your mission, you fancied that I should overwhelm you with reproaches and refuse you any remuneration for such efforts as you may have made in the affair. You therefore think to forestall my anger by this cowardly demonstration on your part. Now tell me what is the amount you require. Name it. Then away with you, and let me see your face no more! "

" Not so fast, my lady, if you please," said Malpas, with an air of cool unconcern, as if he knew that he was enabled to dictate his own conditions and that Venetia dared not refuse compliance therewith. " I am not altogether mercenary, although money is certainly an article that I require and which I mean to have, and to a tolerable handsome amount too. But your ladyship possesses other attractions beside your wealth."

" Colonel Malpas," said Venetia, concentrating all the lightnings of her looks upon the individual who stood before her, " let this scene end at once. I have neither time nor inclination to prolong it. It wants but ten minutes to eight, and at eight my presence will be required elsewhere. Therefore name the sum that you require; it shall be forthcoming at any hour to-morrow. But if you dare breathe another word derogatory to my feelings as a woman, I at

once break off all compromise and leave you to do your worst."

"We shall see," observed Malpas, flippantly. "Ten minutes more, eh?" he continued, glancing at the timepiece. "In that ten minutes everything may be settled amicably between us. You do not seem to comprehend the position in which you stand. In the first place, what would his Royal Highness say if I were to inform him that you have been plotting and planning to counteract all his plots and plans?"

"He would not believe you," responded Venetia, in a tone of apparent confidence, although she did not feel quite so certain on the subject as she chose to appear, and it was this misgiving that rendered her in reality anxious to put a golden seal upon the colonel's lips. "Judging by your antecedents, the prince knows you to be capable of the foulest falsehood. Therefore go and tell his Royal Highness what you choose. He would only wonder how you came to learn that there was any conspiracy in existence at all against the princess, but he would not believe you, even on oath, were you to declare that you obtained that knowledge from me, much less that I had actually employed you to counteract the progress thereof."

"Well," exclaimed Malpas, a diabolical smile of satisfaction again appearing upon his features, "your ladyship now drives me to extremes. If the prince would not believe all those matters which you have detailed, is it any reason that he should disbelieve me if I assured him that his beautiful mistress, on whose head he has heaped wealth and honours, has bestowed her favours on the Earl of Curzon?"

Venetia staggered as if struck by the sudden blow of a hammer, and while every shade and tint of vital colouring disappeared, leaving her cheeks pale as alabaster, she sank back upon the sofa whence she had risen a few moments previously. It was an awful consternation, a frightful dismay that had seized upon her. Until this moment she had believed that Curzon, though an unprincipled libertine and a reckless profligate, as most aristocrats are, was nevertheless high-souled and generous enough to keep the secret of an affair of gallantry as inviolably as if life itself depended on it. But no, it was evident that Curzon was a traitor, and that by his treachery her honour was now

placed at the mercy of Colonel Malpas, the most finished scoundrel that ever belonged to fashionable society.

" Your ladyship sees that I am not to be trifled with," he said, inwardly exulting at the confirmation which his bold averment had just received in the effect it produced upon Venetia.

" The Earl of Curzon is a traitor," she said, after a long pause, during which it cost her more than one effort to regain her self-possession. " But come, sir, what is it you require? And if ever," she added, in a tremulous tone, " you knew how to spare the feelings of a lady, I beseech you to do so now."

" My terms are speedily named," replied Malpas. Then, fixing his looks upon her in a manner which showed him to be inexorable, he said, " Five thousand guineas in the first place, and in the second, the same favour which you have bestowed upon the Earl of Curzon."

Venetia started, although she had foreseen what was coming, and, fixing her eyes upon the colonel, she was about to entreat his mercy as to the latter condition, when a sudden idea struck her.

" You are resolved upon enforcing these terms? " she said, in a cold voice and with a look that suddenly became settled and steady.

" I am resolved," he answered, thinking she had made up her mind to the worst. " Nothing can shake my determination."

" Then must it be as you say," observed Venetia. " To-morrow night, at eleven o'clock, you must be at the private door opening from the palace into the park, and my maid Jessica will give you admittance."

" Ah! but how do I know that the door will really open to admit me? " exclaimed Malpas. " Once get out of a palace, and it is not so easy to get in again."

" Am I not completely in your power? " asked Venetia. " If I accede to the conditions you have laid down, it is to purchase your secrecy. Think you, then, that if I chose to defy you I could not as well do it at once by ordering you to quit the palace, as to-morrow night by refusing to readmit you into it? "

" True," said Malpas, who saw plainly enough that Venetia felt herself to be really and truly in his power. " At

eleven o'clock to-morrow night I shall be at the private door which you have named."

He then bowed and hastened from the room, Jessica being in readiness on the landing to conduct him unobserved out of the palace, for she knew full well that he had been employed by her mistress in some secret matters, and that it was by no means desirable for him to be seen and recognized within those walls, inasmuch as it would naturally strike either the prince regent or Lord Sackville as remarkably strange that Venetia should hold any intercourse with a man who had played so vile a part toward her on former occasions.

Yes, and bitterly, bitterly, too, did Venetia repent the precipitation and rashness with which she had thus renewed her acquaintance with the colonel. But there was now no remedy for it; the mischief was done, and she must either ward off the consequences if she could, or mitigate them as much as possible.

But, ah! eight o'clock strikes; it is time for her to repair to the greenroom and join the throng of amateurs who are to appear upon the stage on the present occasion. Starting from her seat, Venetia looked at herself in the glass. The colour was coming back to her cheeks, and as she rapidly pictured to herself the enthusiasm with which her presence was about to inspire the patrician audience in the private theatre, a smile of triumph shone upon her features. Indeed, when she repaired to the greenroom, so animated were her looks, so gay was her smile, and so sprightly her wit, that no one would have fancied to what a degree of tension her feelings had been strung during the last half-hour.

CHAPTER VIII

A SINGULAR PROPOSAL

In the afternoon of the following day, just as the Marquis of Leveson was sitting down to lunch, a carriage drove up to the door of his mansion in Albemarle Street. Glancing forth from the window, he observed that it was Lady Sackville's equipage, and in less than a minute after the loud double knock had been given, one of his domestics entered to announce that her ladyship requested to speak to him for a single moment at her carriage window.

The marquis, instantaneously suspecting that his functions of self-constituted banker were about to be put into requisition again, chuckled within himself as he sped forth in compliance with the message he had just received, and assuming his most courteous demeanour, he approached the carriage.

Now, as a tall powdered lackey, who had descended from behind the vehicle the moment it stopped, was stationed so close that he could overhear whatever took place between his mistress and the marquis, she was of course compelled to be upon her guard. Accordingly, placing a small packet in the nobleman's hand, she said, "Sackville desired me to stop at your lordship's door, as I passed this way in the carriage, and deliver this packet into your own hand. I believe it is something valuable," she added, flinging a rapid and significant look upon the marquis, "and, by the bye, I think he told me there might be something to come back."

"Yes, a letter of acknowledgments and thanks for what his lordship has thus sent me," responded the marquis, "and which is doubly acceptable on account of being delivered by your ladyship's own fair hands. I will not

ask your ladyship to walk in, as Lady Ernestina is not at home."

"Indeed, I am somewhat pressed for time also," observed Venetia, affecting an air as courteous as if she were really on friendly terms with the nobleman and his niece, instead of loathing the former and hating the latter as heartily as possible.

"I will not detain your ladyship two minutes," said the marquis, and he hastened back into the mansion.

Ascending to his own chamber, he immediately examined the little packet which Venetia had placed in his hand, and he found that it contained ten of the pearls off the string of a hundred which he had presented to her.

"This makes fifteen that have already come back to me," he said to himself as he opened his writing-desk. "I wish that fellow Tash would manage to lead Sackville into deeper extravagances, but the captain declares that Horace is not so easy to be thus entangled. Still he is launching out into certain expenses which will soon involve him, and Tash says that he has some expensive affair of gallantry in hand, too, but he does not know with whom. I wonder whether Venetia wants this money for her husband?"

Thus musing, the Marquis of Leveson drew forth ten bank-notes each to the amount of a thousand pounds, and enveloping them in a sheet of paper, he sealed it and addressed it to Lord Sackville. Then, descending with it in his hand, he delivered it at the carriage window to Lady Sackville in such a manner that the footman who stood close by might read the direction, so that all suspicion of anything clandestine between himself and her ladyship would be averted.

The equipage drove away, and as it proceeded back to Carlton House, Venetia thought within herself, "Positively this must be the last time that I apply to that detested nobleman for pecuniary assistance. And yet he managed it delicately enough, so that the servants could not for an instant suspect there was anything strange in my calling at Leveson House."

On alighting at the palace, Venetia was informed that a lady had called by appointment and was waiting in the drawing-room. A ray of satisfaction lighted up her ladyship's lovely countenance, but before she proceeded to join

her visitress in the saloon, she ascended to her boudoir. There she tore open the letter which the marquis had put into her hand, and having satisfied herself that it contained the notes, she put five of them into her purse, and secured the other five in her writing-desk. Then, having laid aside her carriage-dress, she repaired to the drawing-room where the lady was waiting for her, and concerning whom we must pause to say a few words.

This lady was about three and twenty years of age, and was tolerably good-looking. She had fine hair of a dark brown colour, delicate features, which, without being exactly regular, were interesting, fine eyes, and a very beautiful set of teeth. Her figure was finely formed, — indeed, upon a somewhat large scale when considered in reference to the delicacy of her countenance. Altogether, she was of attractive appearance, and though quiet, genteel, and ladylike in her manners, she had not the polish of what is called " the best society." In that society she had nevertheless mingled for a time, but had not altogether caught its exquisite gloss. Indeed, it was not very difficult to perceive that she properly belonged to a sphere not so elevated. At the same time there was nothing vulgar about her; she was dressed with taste and what might be termed elegant neatness. Her voice was pleasing, and a slight tinge of melancholy gave additional interest to the expression of her countenance.

This lady was Mrs. Malpas, the daughter of a retired butcher, but she herself had never had any connection with the details of the business, having, on the contrary, been brought up in the manner which is usual with a rich tradesman's family. That is to say, she had received a good boarding-school education, so far as instruction and accomplishments went, but she had also learned a great deal of boarding-school nonsense. It was the influence of such sickly sentimentalism as this that was destined to rule the principal actions of her life, as the reader will soon see. She was the elder of several sisters (for she had no brothers), and had been left an heiress by an old bachelor uncle who accumulated a fortune in the pork and sausage line. When she left boarding-school and was duly " brought out " at a Mansion House entertainment, she of course engaged the notice of many admirers. But her fortune was

the principal, if not the sole attraction. Amongst her suitors were Colonel Malpas and the redoubtable Captain Tash. At that special moment the affairs of the former stood in particular need of a patching-up by means of a good matrimonial alliance, and as for the latter, there was no moment better than another for a fortune to fall into his hands. At first the young lady was inclined to listen most favourably to Captain Tash, because he not only had a tremendous pair of moustaches, but also the finest pair of whiskers possible, whereas Colonel Malpas had but a delicate moustache and slight whiskers. But, when it was made known to the sentimental young lady that the colonel was of much higher rank than the captain, that the former really moved in the best circles, whereas the latter only obtained admittance to them by an occasional accident, that the former was actually in the Guards, while the latter was on half-pay or else on no pay at all, she at once decided in favour of the colonel and cut the captain. Now Tash was not the man to stand this. He raged, fumed, bullied, and threatened to commit a wholesale slaughter in Butcherhall Lane, where the family resided. The young lady's father had him bound over to keep the peace, but the captain, in defiance of his recognizances, sent a challenge to Colonel Malpas. This the colonel would not accept, but had the captain locked up in prison for breaking the peace. However, the indefatigable Tash found bail again, emancipated himself from captivity, and threatened to expose the colonel's cowardice at every club in London. He even contrived to obtain a clandestine interview with the young lady, and made such an impression on her by his representations of the colonel's poltroonery and his own remarkable valour, that the sentimental miss, who had just been reading a romance of chivalry, thought that the captain was, after all, the hero into whose arms she ought to fling herself. A runaway match was therefore agreed upon, but the parents discovered all, the colonel was communicated with, and the young lady, overpersuaded once more, agreed to accompany Malpas at once to the altar. While the marriage ceremony was taking place, a discreet friend of the family sought an interview with Captain Tash, and broke to him the terrible tidings how he was thus forestalled by the colonel after all. The gallant captain pummelled the discreet friend within an inch of his life, and then

consented to receive a couple of thousand guineas as an inducement never to molest either the worthy folks in Butcherhall Lane or the newly married couple any more.

Such were the romantic and mysterious circumstances attending the alliance of Colonel Malpas and the porkman's heiress. In the hurry which characterized the proceedings, and in the " old people's " eagerness to save their daughter from the formidable adventurer, Captain Tash, and bestow her upon the aristocratic Malpas, no precaution had been taken to tie up her fortune in any way beneficial to herself. Malpas therefore obtained the whole and sole control thereof. But then the young lady's parents thought that all British officers were men of honour, and that the higher the rank the more superlative the honour; so that those good, easy, and addle-pated City folks had fancied at the time that Colonel Malpas of the Guards must be the very acme of honour itself. The parents and the daughter all learned the contrary to their cost; and when the young lady's fortune was spent, her husband a prisoner, the splendid mansion in Marlborough Street stripped from attic to kitchen by the unholy hands of sheriffs' officers, and she herself obliged to return home to her parents in Butcherhall Lane, the said parents began to suspect that it would have been much better if their daughter had espoused Mr. Simon Snuggs, the saddler, than Colonel Malpas of the Guards. But the young lady did not come to the same wise conclusion from past experience. On the contrary, she regretted the loss of the fine house in which she was her own mistress, and though she hated her husband and would not even open any of the letters he from time to time addressed to her, yet her bitterness toward him resulted rather from rancour at being expelled from her paradise through his extravagances than from the fact of his heartless conduct toward her. So that if he had suddenly become possessed of a fortune and had asked her to return to him, she would gladly have done so; or, on the other hand, if she herself picked up another dowry, she would very likely have sent to inform the colonel of the fact and invite him to return and enjoy it with her.

Such was Mrs. Malpas, the lady who now called upon Venetia in pursuance of a note forwarded by the latter to Butcherhall Lane in the forenoon.

" I have not had the honour of your acquaintance before," said Lady Sackville, adopting her most courteous demeanour and affable tone, " but I am rejoiced to have the present opportunity of forming it. Doubtless you were surprised to receive a note from me at all, but much more so to perceive by its contents that I have business of the utmost importance to speak upon. In that note I also suggested that you should maintain as strict a secrecy as possible relative to the fact of receiving it — "

" And I can assure your ladyship," said Mrs. Malpas, " that I did so. I happened to be alone at the time when the note was delivered, and neither my father nor mother is aware of my receiving it. I could not hesitate to obey the summons at the hour appointed, considering the kind and condescending tone in which the letter was written. Therefore, even before your ladyship breathes a syllable of the business alluded to, I beg to tender my sincerest thanks for your goodness toward me."

" My dear Mrs. Malpas," said Venetia, making the lady sit down upon the sofa by her side, and treating her with the familiar condescension so flattering to her vanity, " I am delighted to perceive that you appreciate beforehand my good intentions and friendly objects. Indeed, it is upon a very serious and delicate matter that I wish to discourse with you, and were you my own sister, I could not entertain a more sincere sympathy than I do toward you in respect to the unfortunate position in which you stand with regard to your husband, for it is on this point that we must deliberate."

" Indeed," said Mrs. Malpas, in evident surprise, " I fancied from something I had heard that your ladyship had every reason to entertain a serious animosity against my husband."

" What was it that you heard? " asked Venetia; " and from whom did you hear it? Let the fullest confidence subsist between us."

" By all means," exclaimed the colonel's wife, delighted at thus entering so speedily upon such familiar terms with the reigning star of fashion. " In answer, then, to your ladyship's questions, I must inform you that Captain Tash, whom I accidentally met a few weeks ago — "

"Ah! I understand," said Venetia, who knew full well that the captain was acquainted with Mrs. Malpas.

Indeed, it was from the captain's own lips — he having lately become a tolerably frequent visitor at Carlton House — she had gleaned all those particulars which we have ere now sketched, and which were so well calculated to give Venetia an insight into the character of Mrs. Malpas. We may add, it was from a knowledge of this character that Venetia had resolved upon the adoption of the course which she was now pursuing with respect to that lady.

"Captain Tash told me," continued Mrs. Malpas, "that my husband had been guilty of some very insulting conduct toward your ladyship, but the nature of which he did not explain."

"Were you not aware," asked Venetia, "that I once visited your house in Great Marlborough Street, on a certain night when Colonel Malpas entertained the prince regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and others?"

"I heard something to that effect," responded Mrs. Malpas, "but I passed that memorable day — for such indeed it was to me — with my parents; and when I returned home to Great Marlborough Street in the evening, I found everything in such confusion that I took but little note of the rumours which met my ears. One fact was overwhelming enough — that ruin had overtaken my husband — "

"Well," interrupted Venetia, "we need not refer particularly to the past. It is, however, necessary for me to explain that Colonel Malpas had the presumption to declare his love for me at the period of which we have been speaking."

"I heard something to that effect," said Mrs. Malpas, "and really when I look at your ladyship, I am not surprised that any gentleman should fall in love with you. I could forgive my own husband for doing so, even were I devotedly attached to him."

"I must thank you for this compliment," said Lady Sackville, smiling. "But permit me to ask whether Captain Tash ever informed you of the part which he played — "

"I heard," interrupted Mrs. Malpas, "that the captain inflicted severe chastisement on my husband the night of the banquet at Great Marlborough Street; and I also under-

stood that it was in consequence of some boasting assertion, as unfounded as it was impudent, made by the colonel in reference to your ladyship. How true all this might be, I scarcely knew, for I was well aware that Captain Tash entertained a bitter hatred against the colonel and would gladly seek an opportunity to avenge himself."

"You occasionally see the captain, then?" said Venetia, beginning to suspect that there might be some little intrigue on the part of that gallant officer and the colonel's wife.

"No, my lady," was the answer, delivered with an unaffected sincerity which instantaneously showed Venetia that her suspicion was altogether unfounded. "I have only met him once for months past, and that was by accident. I was walking with two of my sisters at the time. Perhaps your ladyship has heard that before I was married to the colonel, Captain Tash made me an offer, but I am glad now — heartily glad — that I did not accept it. The stories I have heard of his dreadful violence, his outrageous conduct, the constant scrapes he is getting himself into, and his dissipated mode of life are enough to frighten one and would have been the death of me; for I am quite sure that all I have suffered through Malpas has not been half so bad as I should have endured if I had married Captain Tash."

"The captain is a good-hearted man," said Venetia, "but has all the bad qualities you mention. However, we have wandered from the topic of our discourse; and now, to resume it, I must observe that you are acquainted with a sufficiency of past events to understand how I had every reason to dislike your husband. Nevertheless, when he obtained his release from gaol some four months ago, I took compassion on him, I employed him in a secret mission to the Continent, and now that he has returned to London —"

"He is in London, then, at present?" exclaimed Mrs. Malpas. "I heard that he had gone abroad, but knew not of his return."

"He is only just come back," rejoined Venetia, "and I regret to say that his disposition is not changed for the better. Availing himself of the knowledge of certain secrets, which I should be sorry to have revealed, — secrets, however, you must understand, of a purely business character, — he has dared to use menaces and threats toward me —"

"But for what purpose?" asked Mrs. Malpas, whose

comprehension was not the quickest and the brightest in the world.

"Ah! with reluctance and sorrow do I unfold the truth to the injured wife of that unprincipled man," said Venetia, affecting a kind compassion toward her new acquaintance. "Nevertheless, the truth must be revealed, and when I tell you that Colonel Malpas seeks to compel me to submit to his will by means of threats, coercion, and terrorism — "

"Oh, this is shocking — this is dreadful!" cried Mrs. Malpas. "What must be done? How shall we act? He must be thwarted, he must be reduced to submission, you must be protected."

"That is precisely what I have been thinking," observed Venetia. "And indeed," she continued, after a little hesitation, "I had a certain plan in view — "

"Name it, name it," said Mrs. Malpas, "and if in any way I can assist your ladyship, you may rely upon my good offices."

"But before I explain myself," continued Venetia, "you must answer me a question. Do you feel disposed to live again with your husband, provided the means were supplied to furnish another establishment for you, and a handsome sum of ready money supplied to enable you to commence housekeeping again? Would you, in a word, leave your father's dwelling and return to the society of your husband under such favourable circumstances?"

"Yes, under such favourable circumstances," answered Mrs. Malpas, echoing Venetia's words. "Besides, if your ladyship recommends the adoption of that course, I at once agree to it," she added, seriously.

"Then listen to my plan," said Venetia, inwardly rejoicing at the lady's response. "You must make some excuse to your parents to be enabled to return to me this evening, and pass the night beneath this roof. When the colonel makes his appearance — which he will do — to claim from me an answer to his dishonourable suit, he shall be conducted to the room where you will be already installed, and I will take care that the door shall be closed upon him on the outside. You will thus pass the night together, and you will have an opportunity of giving him a real curtain lecture — "

"But such a lecture will be utterly thrown away upon

him," interrupted Mrs. Malpas. " He will only ridicule and laugh at me — "

" You do not exactly understand the nature of the lecture which you are to give to him," said Venetia. " I am well aware that to appeal to his moral feelings as a husband or as a man will be utterly useless, but to appeal to his selfishness may produce quite a different effect. You will tell him, then, that you are now upon intimate terms with me, and that it is my intention to introduce you into the highest circles and the best society. You will go on to observe that your father has agreed to allow you a thousand a year to live upon, and has given you five thousand guineas to furnish a mansion and commence the world anew, in order that you may live in independence, happiness, and comfort."

" But my father has done no such thing," exclaimed Mrs. Malpas, in astonishment, " and he would not do anything of the kind."

" No, but I will do it all for you," answered Venetia, " and you can attribute it to your parents' kindness — "

" But such goodness on your part," cried Mrs. Malpas, in amazement; " is it possible — are you joking — "

" It is no subject to jest upon," returned Venetia. " My dear friend," she continued, " can you not understand the object that I have in view? Your husband not only demands the surrender of my person, but also seeks to extort a large sum of money from me. Now you will not be angry if I declare that I so thoroughly hate and cordially detest your husband that I would sooner die than yield to his wishes on the first point, while, on the second, it would only encourage him to further extortion if I were to comply with his demand. You can now understand that it is well worth my while to adopt any course in order to save myself from that humiliation and that danger, and by the plan I am suggesting, you can likewise be restored to a position of comfort, respectability, and independence, without having to drag along your existence in Butcherhall Lane."

" Then what would your ladyship have me do? " asked Mrs. Malpas, now beginning to see clearly, like one who emerges from a dense fog.

" I would have you recite to your husband," continued Venetia, " the tale which I have ere now devised for the purpose, how I have taken you by the hand, how you are

to be introduced at court, how you have succeeded in inducing your father to make you independent, and how, for the sake of appearances, you are willing to forgive the past and dwell once more with your husband. He will greedily embrace your offer. The assurance that you possess an income of a thousand a year will bring him to your feet and make him promise to treat you with all possible kindness henceforth. But when you find him thus pliant and ductile, you must tell him that there is one condition which you have to impose as the basis of a future good understanding between you: namely, that inasmuch as you have conceived the utmost friendship for me, and as I have communicated to you your husband's infamous conduct toward me on the present occasion, you stipulate for a solemn agreement on his part to abstain from all molestation toward me in future."

"Ah! I understand," said Mrs. Malpas, now amazingly relishing the scheme which Lady Sackville had propounded. "The idea is excellent, and may be carried out to complete success."

"I felt persuaded you would embark in this friendly enterprise with me," said Lady Sackville. "I have already provided myself with the sum of five thousand pounds, which I will place in your hands this evening, and which you can show to the colonel not only as a proof of the tale you will tell him, but also as an inducement for him to yield to your views."

After some further discussion upon the details of the scheme the two ladies separated until the evening, Mrs. Malpas returning to Butcherhall Lane to devise some excuse for a night's absence from her parents' home, while Lady Sackville remained in the drawing-room pondering upon all that had just taken place.

In about half an hour her husband entered that apartment, and accosting her with mingled suspense and hesitation he said, "Well, Venetia, have you been enabled to comply with my request?"

"I have," she answered. Then drawing forth her purse, she produced the bank-notes which she had deposited there and handed them to her husband, at the same time observing, with one of her most enchanting smiles, "I am afraid you are getting rather extravagant, Horace. I hope that Captain Tash does not lead you into gambling or betting — "

" Venetia," interrupted Lord Sackville, somewhat haughtily, " if you mean to accompany your present with a lecture, pray take it back. I thought our agreement was that we should each pursue our own career with mutual independence, so long as we observed all the outward decencies of life and sustained proper appearances as on the part of man and wife."

" Such was our agreement," observed Venetia, with a still more winning smile, " and let it be adhered to. If I have given you offence or wounded your feelings, I am truly sorry. I was only fearful that as Tash is now frequently with you, and as he is not overparticular in his own pursuits — "

" Come, we will have no angry words nor remonstrances of any kind," said Horace, and thrusting the bank-notes into his pocket, he embraced his wife, renewed his thanks for the pecuniary succour she had afforded him, and then quitted the room.

CHAPTER IX

THE KEY UNDER THE MAT

It was about half-past ten o'clock in the evening, and if we look into the dining-room belonging to the Sackvilles' suite of apartments at Carlton House, we shall find Lord Sackville himself, the prince regent, and Captain Tash seated at the table drinking curaçoa punch and playing cards for heavy stakes.

A domestic entered and handed Horace a note, with the whispered intimation that immediate attention was requested thereto. Lord Sackville, instantaneously recognizing the handwriting, begged his guests to excuse him while he perused the billet; and when his eyes had hastily scanned it over, he rose from his chair, exclaiming, "Your Royal Highness must excuse me, — and you also, captain, — but very particular business — "

"No doubt of it," said the prince, laughing, "it is a lady's handwriting, I'll be bound. Besides, any one could tell that much by the way the elegant little missive was folded."

"Yes, and I can scent the fragrance of it from here," said Tash. "'Tis perfumed with attar of roses."

"Be off with you, Horace," said the prince, still laughing. "Tash and I will continue the game together, for it seems that I have a run of luck this evening, since I have pocketed a cool thousand of your money, Horace."

"Another time you will give me my revenge, sir," replied Sackville; then, having intimated that it was very probable he should not return until a late hour, he quitted the room.

"Sackville has an intrigue on hand," observed the prince, as the door closed behind his youthful lord steward; "have you any idea who the fair one is? "

" Not in the least, sir," responded Tash. " He keeps it very close to himself, and I am not the man to pry into a friend's secrets. Daggers and bayonets! no, not I, for the world."

" You are no doubt an excellent fellow," said the prince, laughing. " Come, fill the tumblers. This punch is superfine."

The captain did as he was desired, and, having replenished the two glasses, he at once emptied his own, saying, " Well, I do think that this is an excellent brew. So here goes another just to drink the health of Sackville's fair one, whoever she may be. And by the bye," continued the captain, again replenishing his glass, " I must drink success to the amour, hoping that if there be a husband in the case he is not a jealous one."

" Ah! talking of women and gallantry," said the prince, " who was that lady that visited Lady Sackville this afternoon, and whom you bowed to as she passed through the hall to go out? You were coming in at the moment if you remember, and I was passing out of the council-chamber — "

" I recollect it," exclaimed Tash. " It was Mrs. Malpas."

" What — that scoundrel colonel's wife? " said the prince.

" The very same," responded the captain. " I knew her before she was Mrs. Malpas. In fact, between your Royal Highness, myself, and the post, I made love to her — "

" But what on earth can she have to do with Lady Sackville? " exclaimed the prince.

" Perhaps come to ask forgiveness for her husband, or something of the kind," said Tash. " She is such a soft, spoony, sentimental creature — "

" But she has a marvellous fine figure, though," said the prince, " and such a dainty foot and ankle. Upon my word, as she tripped through the hall, it quite made me feel in a state of excitement to observe those beautifully rounded ankles. Her bust, too, struck me as being very fine."

" There is no doubt, sir, she is a devilish nice woman," observed Tash. " So here's her health," and he again filled and emptied his glass, just as if it were a water-drinking instead of a punch-imbibing process.

" Her teeth, too, seemed to be very good," continued the prince. " I noticed her particularly as she turned with a half-smile to acknowledge your bow."

"Her teeth are magnificent," answered the captain. "I am very fond of fine teeth, so I am of this punch," and he refilled his glass. "But do you not intend, sir, to go on with the cards?"

"Not just for the moment," answered the prince; "let us talk of this Mrs. Malpas. She has somewhat struck my fancy, and if I thought — "

"I am well acquainted with Mrs. Malpas," said the captain, now penetrating the prince's views with regard to that lady, "and if I can do anything — your Royal Highness knows what I mean — "

"But what sort of a reputation does she bear?" asked the prince, catching the look of intelligence which the captain fixed upon him. "Is she quite correct, quite modest, very particular, and so forth?"

"I believe so, I never heard anything to the contrary," rejoined the gallant officer. "In fact, I am almost certain that she is a virtuous woman. But Lord bless you, sir," he continued, "if your Royal Highness only wishes to possess Mrs. Malpas, it could be easily managed, for she is such a soft, easy kind of creature that the bare idea of the honour which the prince regent would be doing her would overpower her at once and make her fall into your arms. But I wonder where Sackville has put his cigars."

"Ah! let us have a cigar," said the prince, "and we will discuss this matter about Mrs. Malpas."

The captain rose from his seat and searched in the sideboard drawers, on the mantel, and every place he could think of for Sackville's cigar-case, but it was not to be found.

"If you don't mind the trouble of going to my dressing-room," said the prince, — "you know where it is? — you will find some splendid cigars upon the mantel. Or you can ring and send to fetch them."

"No, I will go myself, sir," replied Tash, and thus speaking he issued forth from the dining-room.

It was now close upon eleven o'clock, and as the captain was proceeding along the passage to seek the prince's private apartments, he suddenly caught sight of Mrs. Malpas and Lady Sackville as they emerged together from the latter's boudoir. On observing the gallant officer advancing, the two ladies retreated into the room, doubtless fancying that

they were far enough off for Mrs. Malpas to have escaped recognition, and thus hastily reëntering the boudoir, they closed the door.

Captain Tash was struck by this circumstance. What could Mrs. Malpas be possibly doing in Carlton House? How was it that she had thus managed to place herself on such evident terms of intimacy with Venetia as to visit her twice in the same day? Not only was the captain's curiosity piqued, but he was likewise anxious to watch the motions of Mrs. Malpas in consequence of the discourse which he had held with the prince concerning her a few minutes back. He felt convinced that she was not now at the palace on a mere friendly visit to Lady Sackville, but that something savouring of intrigue or manœuvring was going on, — an opinion which seemed to be confirmed by the sudden withdrawal of the ladies on beholding him approach along the passage.

Casting his eyes hastily up and down the corridor, Captain Tash could see no place where to conceal himself, and for a few instants he stood irresolute how to act. But immediately behind where he had halted was a door that stood ajar, and without further hesitation, but at all risks, he stepped back, pushed open the door, and entered the place into which it led. Obscurity enveloped it, but from the beam of light which penetrated at the moment that he opened the door, he fancied that he caught the outlines of a couch and drapery, thus inducing the belief that it was a bedroom.

Here, with the door kept ajar, — that is to say, open to about the extent of an inch, — the captain ensconced himself, and listened with breathless attention. Two or three minutes passed, and all was still in the corridor. The captain now began to recollect that he had quitted the prince for the purpose of procuring cigars from his Royal Highness's dressing-room, and he was just thinking that he had better perform that errand and return to his royal companion, when he heard a door open gently higher up the passage. Motionless as a statue, and breathless as one too, did the captain remain at his post, and in a few moments he heard the rustling of female dresses and the gentle tread of light feet approaching from the direction where the door had opened. Almost immediately afterward he caught the soft murmur of voices, and the next moment the two ladies —

for he could now distinguish through the keyhole that there were two figures — stopped at the door of the room immediately opposite the one where he was stationed.

"This is the chamber, my dear friend," said a voice, which Captain Tash instantaneously discovered to be Venetia's; then, as she threw the opposite door open, she said, "Lights are burning and everything is prepared."

The two ladies then entered the chamber, and Captain Tash, still peeping through the keyhole of his own door, caught a glimpse of the countenance of Mrs. Malpas as she passed into that room, the door of which was immediately closed. For upwards of five minutes all was then still in the passage again.

Still Captain Tash remained at his post. What could this mean? Was Mrs. Malpas going to pass the night at Carlton House? If so, there would have been nothing very extraordinary in such a circumstance, supposing that she was on very intimate terms with Venetia and that no mystery was observed. But the captain, who was a thorough man of the world, knew full well that Mrs. Malpas was not the kind of woman that the intellectual Venetia would choose as a bosom friend, and he therefore argued that her ladyship was making use of the colonel's wife for some purpose or another. Besides, there was evidently a certain degree of mystery in the manner in which Mrs. Malpas had been conducted to that room; and thus everything seemed to corroborate the captain's first suspicion that something of a designing and covert nature was going on.

Such were the reflections that passed through his mind, as he still kept his post; and at the expiration of five minutes he heard female footsteps again coming down the passage. By aid of the convenient keyhole, the captain presently recognized Jessica, Venetia's maid, and by the stealthy manner in which this confidential abigail was threading the passage, as also from the importance expressed in her looks, Captain Tash felt more than ever assured that some strange manœuvring was really in progress and that Jessica had her part to perform in it.

Halting at the opposite chamber, Jessica gave a low knock, and Venetia immediately opened the door.

"Can I be of any assistance, my lady?" asked the abigail, in a voice which though subdued was nevertheless just loud

enough for Captain Tash's ears, sharpened as they were by his curiosity, to catch what she said.

" No, I have assisted Mrs. Malpas to undress," responded Venetia, also in a low tone, but which was nevertheless audible to the eavesdropping captain.

" Then shall I now go? " asked Jessica, with a significant look.

" Yes, it is eleven o'clock," said Lady Sackville, and closing the door again, she disappeared from the captain's view.

Jessica then tripped lightly along the passage, and in another minute or two Venetia came forth from the room opposite. But as she still held the door open in her hand, she looked back and said, in an encouraging tone, " Good night, my dear friend, and may the issue be as we anticipate."

She then came forward, closed the door, locked it, and placed the key under the fringed mat which was set against the threshold. Having done this, Venetia retraced her way along the passage, and in a few moments the sound of a door closing reached the ears of Captain Tash.

Feeling assured that she had entered some room, — most probably her boudoir, which the captain knew to be in that passage, — he issued forth from his place of concealment and hurried back to the apartment where he had left the prince regent.

" Well, what became of you? " demanded his Royal Highness. " You have been absent full twenty minutes, and I was just going to ring the bell and order a servant to look after you."

" Do not talk, sir, for Heaven's sake! " said Tash, evidently labouring under some strange kind of excitement. " Let me speak — there is not a moment to spare. The strangest adventure in all the world — "

" Well, what in the name of patience is it? " demanded the prince.

" Mrs. Malpas is here — beneath this roof," answered Tash. " She is going to pass the night here. She is at this moment alone in her bedroom, — a bedroom belonging to the Sackvilles' suite of apartments, and Lady Sackville herself conducted her thither. I saw it all — I hid myself and listened — "

"Are you drunk or mad?" exclaimed the prince, surveying Tash in amazement.

"Neither," was the prompt reply, "and if any one but your Royal Highness had asked me such a question, in another moment I would have knocked his head off his shoulders. But come, will you avail yourself of this opportunity? It is a golden one. Daggers and wounds! don't hesitate, sir. I conjure you."

"But is it all true?" exclaimed the prince, now starting from his seat, and being somewhat inflamed with the punch which he had been drinking, his imagination instantaneously depicted to itself the pleasures of a new conquest.

"Will your Royal Highness be guided by me?" demanded Tash, impatiently. "Come, and if in a few minutes you are not clasped in the arms of that very fair one whom you coveted ere now, then may I be denounced as a liar, and may a stigma settle for ever on the name of Rolando Tash."

Not another moment did the prince hesitate. His imagination, already revelling in the sensuous joys which his prurient fancy conjured up, urged him on and stifled all scruples. As for what Venetia might say, — or whether she would ever discover the proceeding at all, — he paused not to reflect; his passions, now strongly aroused, were dominant for the time being.

Issuing forth from the apartment, the prince regent and Captain Tash proceeded along the passage together; and on reaching the chamber to which Mrs. Malpas had been introduced, the gallant officer stooped down and drew forth the key from beneath the velvet mat. This proceeding somewhat surprised the prince, for it naturally struck him as strange that the key should be there. But the captain placed his finger upon his lip, and his Royal Highness said not a word. The next moment the key was introduced into the lock by the hand of the gallant officer, the door was opened, and the prince regent without another instant's hesitation stepped in.

Captain Tash then closed the door, locked it, put the key into his pocket, and once more concealed himself in the room opposite; for he felt convinced that the key had been placed beneath the mat by Venetia to aid the intrigue which was

going on and he was resolved to wait and see the issue thereof, if possible.

Here we must leave the gallant officer and follow the prince regent into the chamber which had been assigned by Lady Sackville to Mrs. Malpas.

CHAPTER X

THE ROYAL INTRUDER

The couch in the chamber was so situated, with the drapery drawn around it, that as the prince entered he could not immediately perceive the lady who occupied it. Wax candles were burning upon the table, and gently drawing back the curtain, his Royal Highness cast a hurried and anxious look upon Mrs. Malpas. We say anxious, because he was fearful at the moment that on recognizing him she might scream forth.

But the lady had her eyes fast closed, and indeed was pretending to be asleep. By the advice of Venetia she had placed herself in a manner which, with all the appearance of an unstudied abandonment, had the effect of displaying her charms to the most voluptuous advantage. As a matter of course she fancied that it was her husband who had just entered, and as Malpas was to be introduced there under the impression that it was the lovely Venetia whom he would find in readiness to receive him, it was as a matter of calculation that Mrs. Malpas had disposed herself in the most provoking attitude, so as to enthral those desires which the idea of possessing Venetia would no doubt excite in the colonel's breast. She feigned to be asleep, too, in order that her husband (as she supposed him to be) might have leisure to collect his thoughts and see the necessity of putting the best possible face on the disappointment thus in store for him, and likewise that he might have an opportunity of contemplating those charms which his wife, with a very pardonable vanity, flattered herself could not be altogether without an effect upon him after so long a separation.

But the prince, not knowing anything of all these matters,

"SUCH WAS THE DELICIOUS SPECTACLE WHICH GREETED
THE PRINCE'S EYES"

Photographed from original by Bird.

"SUCH WAS THE DELICIOUS SPECTACLE WHICH GREETED THE PRINCE'S EYES"

Photogravure from original by Bird.

— neither why Mrs. Malpas was there at all, nor whom she expected, — supposed her to be really sleeping, and with a quick glance swept over the couch did he observe all that was sensuously exciting and voluptuously provocative in the abandonment of her person as she had thus disposed herself. One white and well-rounded arm was curved above her head, her dark brown hair flowed negligently over the pillow, her shoulders and bust were uncovered, and her other arm lay upon the coverlid, the folds and plaits of which developed the symmetry of the lower limbs, thus delineating the fine modelling of their proportions. The flush of excitement was upon the lady's cheeks, and the moist lips, which she held apart the better to feign slumber, revealed two rows of pearly teeth.

Such was the delicious spectacle which greeted the prince's eyes as he slowly drew aside the curtains. But not for many moments did he suffer his looks to linger on the lady whom he believed to be sleeping soundly. His desires were worked up to the highest pitch, the blood seemed to boil in his veins. It was not an intoxication, but a delirium of pleasure that seized upon him, for these were ever the sensations which the royal voluptuary experienced when a new conquest seemed about to crown his triumphs in the wars of love. Burning, therefore, with impatience to profit by the present golden opportunity, and fearful that the lady might awake and scream out in the sudden fright of beholding a man in her room, he at once advanced on tiptoe up to the table and snuffed out the candles. This proceeding was accomplished so suddenly that although Mrs. Malpas opened her eyes at the first click of the snuffers, yet the second candle was extinguished ere she had time to observe that the individual was not her husband. She just caught sight of the form as it stood by the table, but almost at the same moment the room was enveloped in darkness, so that she perceived not the definite outline of that male shape.

" Percy," she now said, in a low and tremulous tone, as she pretended to awaken up, " we thus meet again. But little, little did you expect to behold me here," she continued, in accents of mild and gentle reproach. " Ah! were you not astonished when your eyes fell upon the occupant of this couch, and instead of the magnificent form of Lady Sackville

you beheld me, your wife, her whom you have neglected and whom you have perhaps fancied to be your enemy. But wherefore did you extinguish those lights so suddenly? Is it that I am loathsome and hateful to you, that you cannot bear to look upon me? Or is it that you yourself feel remorse for the past and shame for the present, and dare not meet my gaze? If it be so, — and sincerely, most sincerely do I hope it is, — then is there reason to expect that all the best feelings of your nature are not extinguished within you. But wherefore do you not answer me? Ah! you are astounded at this unexpected meeting with me, or perhaps you are listening in silent disgust and scorn at what you may haply deem a vulgar curtain-lecture? But suppose that I have good news for you? Suppose that I could tell you of wealth and prospects of happiness? Would you not listen to me with feelings of interest then?"

The reader can perhaps imagine far better than we can describe the sudden stupefaction which seized upon the prince when Mrs. Malpas first began to speak, — indeed, as the very opening word she uttered fell upon his ears. That word was a name, the name of Percy, her husband's Christian name. The truth flashed to the mind of the prince in a moment: it was her husband whom she was expecting there. That stupefaction became a positive consternation as she went on speaking. He saw that she fancied she was addressing herself to her husband, whom she was disposed to forgive for his past offences toward her; and he felt that this was scarcely the mood in which a woman could bear to be told that it was not the husband whom she expected, but an interloper who had sought her presence by stratagem and was now listening to her in the dark.

But still something must be done. For a moment the prince thought of beating a quick retreat, but then he recollected that he had heard Tash lock the door behind him, and deep was the imprecation which in the depth of his soul the royal voluptuary vented on the head of the officious captain who had brought him into this strange dilemma.

Retreat was therefore impossible, and yet again recurred the thought that something must be done. The lady was still going on talking, still delivering herself of those expressions which we have just now recorded. The prince grew more and more bewildered. She had asked why the candles

were extinguished. What on earth could he say? She then asked him why he did not speak to her. Again, what in the name of goodness was he to say? And yet something must be done. The position was growing fearfully critical. If he revealed himself, would she alarm the whole palace with her cries? Suddenly the prince regent recollected what Tash had told him relative to her being of a disposition that would sink overwhelmed beneath the honour of the royal favour, and inspired by the cheering hope, the prince resolved to do his best in bringing the present dilemma to a tranquil and peaceful issue. Advancing therefore to the couch, he took her hand and pressed it to his lips, but without uttering a word, and this was done at the instant she reached that part where her speech broke off as above indicated.

"Ah! I am glad," she continued, "that you are not filled with anger and vexation at the disappointment you have experienced. At all events, let me beseech you to sit down by the side of the couch, and talk seriously and deliberately with me — By the bye, you have shaved off your moustache," she observed, forgetting for the moment that she ought to be playing a grave and sentimental part; but the natural frivolity of her character would thus break out in spite of herself, in spite, also, of the tutorings she had received from Lady Sackville. "And let me tell you that your hand is not quite so smooth as it used to be, it is somewhat wrinkled — Heavens! what a dissipated life you must have been leading to have got your hand so wrinkled during the short space of a few months. Let me see, it was in October last year when we separated, and this is the end of April — But why have you withdrawn your hand?"

The prince, thinking that the moment was not quite come yet for revealing himself, patted her cheek three or four times with the palm of the hand which he had just withdrawn from the grasp of her own fair fingers, and then feeling for the chair at the side of the couch, he sat down.

"Now, my dear Percy," resumed the lady, "I have a proposal to make to you, which you may accept if you will, and I do not think you will refuse it. Suppose that no affection subsists between us, yet for decency's sake should we live together like man and wife, if not as man and wife. But you will ask me about our means. Now let me tell you that I am better off than you fancy. I have got five

thousand pounds which my father has given me, and I have brought them hither with me to show you, and thus convince you that I am telling the truth. Only you have put out the lights, and I cannot conceive why — "

By this time the prince had collected his scattered and bewildered ideas in such a way that his passions had also flamed up once more. His imagination pictured to itself this lady as he had seen her when first entering the room, in that voluptuous abandonment of her person which had excited his desires to almost a frenzied degree, and through the deep darkness of the chamber did he now behold her with his mental vision. And he was close by her, he was seated against the couch on which she lay. If he stretched out his hand it would encounter a warm, plump arm or a heaving bosom, if he leaned forward he would inhale the fragrance of her breath, and a perfume of sensuousness seemed to float around him, intoxicating his brain with its influence.

He again took her hand, he pressed it to his lips; then he kissed her cheeks — But ah! a sudden and a half-stifled cry escaped her lips as she feels something cold touch her naked breast with a sensation as if it were a weapon about to inflict death from a murderous hand. It is the star which the prince had worn in the afternoon when holding a Privy Council, and which he had kept upon his coat. The lady's fingers, instinctively seeking for the object that sent a thrill through her bosom, felt the star, and a terrible suspicion instantaneously flashed to her mind.

" Good God! who is it? " she exclaimed, but in a half-stifled, hysterical voice, as she convulsively pushed the prince away from her.

" Fear not, dear lady, I am the prince," was the quick, we might almost say, the galvanic response, for his Royal Highness felt that this was the crisis of the adventure.

" The prince! " repeated Mrs. Malpas, in a sort of suffocating tone.

" Yes, the prince, who loves, who adores you," resumed the royal voluptuary, with electric haste, as he once more seized her hand and pressed it to his heart. " Yes, dearest lady, I am one who can appreciate your charms, who will love and cherish you, treat you with kindness, raise you to distinction, place you upon a pedestal amidst the beauties

of rank and fashion, — in a word, do everything that may convince you of the depth and the sincerity of his passion. Tell me, then, tell me, is not the love of your prince, the love of him who will one day be your sovereign, better than the society of a worthless, unprincipled fellow like your husband? "

" Ah! my husband," ejaculated the lady, in sudden alarm. " Does he know that you are here? "

" No, Heaven forbid that I should compromise you! " exclaimed the prince.

" But he will come, then! Every moment he may come! " said the lady, in accents convulsed with dread. " Oh, what am I to do? What am I to do? "

" Summon your fortitude to your aid," hastily responded the prince, now snatching a thousand little liberties as he caught the terrified lady in his arms and strained her to his breast. " Should Malpas indeed come, answer him at the door, tell him you have thought better of it, and that you will not receive him."

" But he fancies that it is Lady Sackville whom he is coming here to meet," said Mrs. Malpas, not reflecting whether there were any harm in making this statement. " Your Royal Highness must understand," she continued, hurriedly, " that my wicked husband wished to coerce her ladyship, and her ladyship placed me here to receive him in her stead."

" So I understood from the opening observations which you made when I first entered the room," said the prince. " But hush! some one approaches."

The prince and Mrs. Malpas now held their breath to listen, and they distinctly heard footsteps pause suddenly just outside the door. Then there was a rustling of a gown, accompanied by a groping about underneath the mat at the threshold, which sounds indicated clearly enough that some one was looking for the key which had ere now been concealed there. These sounds were followed by low whispers. The door was tried next, but as it remained immovable a gentle tap was given.

Then, in the lowest possible accent, did the prince whisper certain rapid instructions to Mrs. Malpas, and issuing from the couch she felt her way through the darkness to the door, and said, in a low tone, " Who is there? "

"'Tis I, with the colonel," responded the voice of Jessica on the outside of the door.

"Bid the colonel depart as he came. I have changed my mind, I will have nothing to do with him," replied Mrs. Malpas, speaking through the keyhole, and in accents so low that it was impossible for the colonel, who was with Jessica, to recognize the voice of his wife.

Immediately after she had given utterance to these words, Mrs. Malpas turned away from the door and was caught in the arms of the prince, who strained her to his breast; but he felt that she was trembling all over, while her heart was beating quickly and her bosom was palpitating violently with the excitement of the present scene.

"Now let them all think what they like and do what they like," murmured the prince in the lady's ear, as he bore her back to the couch.

But just at this moment a strange noise, resembling a sudden rush and a short scuffle in the passage, just outside the door, reached the ears of his Royal Highness and Mrs. Malpas. They listened with suspended breath; a door closed opposite, and then all was still once more.

"What could that be?" asked Mrs. Malpas, in a suffocating tone, and again trembling with the excitement of alarm and suspense.

"Nothing that concerns us," responded the prince, straining her with still more frantic violence in his arms, as if by the very power of his caresses he sought to lull the trembling of her form and the fluttering of her heart.

But he could not help thinking at the moment that the noise in the passage which had just startled them was some freak or achievement on the part of his coadjutor in this night's adventure, the redoubtable Captain Tash.

CHAPTER XI

THE FEMALE GARB

In consequence of the colonel's watch having stopped, he was about twenty minutes later than the hour of appointment at the private door of the palace, and Jessica therefore had to wait his arrival. When he made his appearance, she chided him for this delay, but he at once explained the cause, expressing his deep sorrow for the circumstance.

The abigail led him up into the passage communicating with the Sackvilles' suite of apartments, and on reaching the door of the chamber where, as we have already seen, Mrs. Malpas and the prince were together, Jessica stooped down and felt for the key. But it was not there, and for a moment she thought that perhaps Lady Sackville might have either forgotten to place it under the mat, or, on a second thought, had purposely left it inside. Malpas inquired in a low whisper wherefore Jessica seemed bewildered, and she hurriedly explained that she was searching for the key of the apartment. This was the whispering that the prince and Mrs. Malpas had overheard, as already described.

Jessica now tried the handle, but, as we have also stated, the door moved not. Then she tapped gently, and when answered she intimated in a low voice that Colonel Malpas was with her, whereupon, to her own amazement and to the mingled rage and disappointment of the colonel himself, a voice from inside, and which he supposed to be Venetia's, announced a change of mind and ordered Malpas to depart.

Jessica actually staggered back from the door, and turning her eyes upon the colonel, she saw that he was pale with rage and quivering from head to foot.

" Stop," she said, " there is some mistake. I must go and see. Remain here for a single moment, and if you meet

anybody, say you have come to see Lord Sackville, or your old butler, Plumpstead, or anybody else, so long as you invent some excuse."

Then having delivered these instructions with nervous haste, Jessica tripped away, hurrying along the passage to Venetia's boudoir, which she immediately entered.

But scarcely had the door of that sanctuary closed behind the lady's-maid, when the colonel, who was standing irresolute and bewildered where she had left him, was suddenly seized upon by two powerful arms, and the ejaculation of alarm which rose to his lips was stifled by a hand being placed on his mouth. Glancing around at the individual who had thus surreptitiously assailed and mastered him, he recognized the moustached and whiskered countenance of the formidable Captain Tash.

For a moment the colonel struggled desperately to extricate himself, but the captain lifting him in his arms, and still maintaining one hand forcibly held over his mouth, carried him into the room whence he had thus so suddenly emerged. There, as the captain immediately closed the door behind him, they were enveloped in utter darkness, but as the colonel felt himself released from the powerful gripe of his assailant, he heard that formidable individual's voice breathe a terrible threat in his ears.

" If you dare cry out, or move without my leave," said the captain, " I will cut you into mince-meat."

Malpas was overwhelmed with terror. What could all this mean? Had he been inveigled into a trap to be ill-treated, perhaps murdered? Every circumstance seemed to confirm his belief that treachery was intended him. That seeming inability of the lady's-maid to find the key of the room opposite, the announcement from within that room, and which he of course believed to have been made by Venetia, the abrupt manner in which Jessica had left him, the sudden assault made on him by Tash, and now this forcible carrying him off into a place where a pitchy darkness prevailed, together with a knowledge of the desperate character of the man himself and the conviction that there was a deep personal animosity existing on that individual's part against him, all these circumstances were but too well calculated to fill even a braver man than Malpas with suspicions of treachery.

" For Heaven's sake do not hurt me," he said, so soon as he could recover the power of speech, " and I will do whatever you order me."

" You sneaking, grovelling, despicable coward," exclaimed Tash, who entertained the most cordial hatred for the colonel, " what a pretty figure you are doubtless cutting now, if I had but a light to see you! "

" Oh, do get a light, Captain Tash," implored Malpas, to whom the darkness was fraught with indescribable terrors, for he every instant fancied that some assassin blow would be dealt him. " I know that it serves me very right, what you are doing or what you intend to do, but, for Heaven's sake, forgive me, and I swear by everything sacred that I will molest Lady Sackville no more."

" Ah! you will swear that, will you? " said the captain, who now began to have a dim, though still very dim, idea of the truth relative to this night's adventure. At all events, it struck him that there was plot and counterplot on the part of Malpas and Venetia respectively, and of course the captain, for more reasons than one, was well disposed to take the part of Lady Sackville. " And so you swear," he accordingly said, " that you will never molest her ladyship again? "

" Yes, I swear, I swear most solemnly," said the colonel, still in accents indicative of the profoundest alarm. " Therefore I beseech you to spare me, I implore you not to do me a mischief, nor to suffer one to be done me."

" Well, it was my intention," observed Captain Tash, delighted to have the opportunity of torturing the wretched coward, " to cut your throat from ear to ear."

" O horror! " groaned the colonel, and the captain heard him fall upon his knees. " For God's sake don't, don't! " and his teeth chattered audibly.

" But if I spare you," said Tash, " if I lay aside this great butcher's knife that I have just now got in my hand — "

" My God! my God! " moaned the wretched colonel, who felt that his hair was standing on end, while from head to foot the cold perspiration broke out all over him.

" And devilish sharp it is, too," added Tash, inwardly chuckling at this cruel revenge he was inflicting upon his enemy.

" No, no, you will not, you cannot perpetrate this atrocity.

Heavens! could Lady Sackville have prompted you to do it?" exclaimed the miserable man.

"How dare you, then, molest her?" demanded Tash. "Gibbets and daggers! thunder and wounds! didn't you have enough of it that night when I thrashed you in your own hall?"

"For Heaven's sake, name your conditions and let me go," said the colonel, in a voice of anguished entreaty. "What can I do? What guarantee can I offer you? What security can I give that I will fulfil your terms?"

"Ah! that's the difficulty," observed Tash. "If I let you go now, you will only renew your tricks again another time. But ah! here is a tinder-box," he suddenly exclaimed, "and we will throw a light upon the matter."

Thus speaking, the gallant officer, by the aid of the flint and steel, soon lighted a candle which was standing on the mantel, where his hand had accidentally come in contact with the materials for thus procuring that light, and as his eyes now swept around, he perceived, as he had already suspected, that the scene of the present episode was a bedchamber. But it was a small one, and by no means handsomely though still very neatly furnished, while several articles of feminine apparel, such as cotton gowns, caps, and so forth, showed that it was a chamber belonging to some female dependent, most likely one of Lady Sackville's maids. On the floor the colonel was still kneeling, his countenance ghastly pale, his lips ashy white and quivering, his hands joined, and his whole appearance denoting the most excruciating terror. But as the light shone upon the scene, and the colonel observed that the place into which he had been borne was only a bedchamber and had not the slightest appearance of a human slaughter-house, and, moreover, as Captain Tash did not appear to be brandishing the sharp butcher's knife whereof he had spoken, the colonel recovered somewhat of his presence of mind, and, slowly rising from his knees, he said, "I did not think that you would carry your dreadful threats into execution, after all."

"Don't be too sure," exclaimed the captain, fixing upon him his fiercest look. Then, putting his hand underneath his coat-tails, he said, "It was through merciful considerations that I put away the knife before I lit the candle, but if you think that I am not capable of inflicting a ghastly punish-

ment upon you, then, by all the cannons and bayonets, I will very soon show you the contrary," and he made a movement as if about to draw forth the formidable knife from his coat-pocket.

"No, no!" ejaculated the colonel, "spare me, spare me! Tell me what you require, and I will at once accede to your demands."

Suddenly the thought struck Captain Tash that it would be gratifying his revenge and ministering to his facetious sense of amusement at the same time if he were to put a crowning ignominy upon the grovelling coward whom he so loathed and detested. No sooner did the idea thus strike him than he resolved to carry it into execution, and assuming his most ferocious aspect, he exclaimed, "There is but one condition on which I will spare you."

"Name it, name it," eagerly cried the colonel.

"That you put on this gown and this cap," said Tash, pointing to the articles of female apparel which he thus specified, "and that you go forth from the palace in this garb."

"Good heavens! you cannot be serious?" said the colonel, in dismay.

"Ten thousand thunders!" exclaimed the captain, "I never was more serious in my life. Come, be quick, or, by Heaven! the butcher's knife —"

"Oh, don't, don't," groaned the colonel, a cold tremor passing visibly over him.

"Then be quick, I say," said the captain, again thrusting his hand in a menacing manner beneath his coat-tails to grasp the visionary butcher's knife.

"Yes, yes," said Malpas, in such a flutter of cowardly excitement that he scarcely knew what he was doing.

"Now, then, let me be your handmaid," said Tash, and stripping off the colonel's coat and waistcoat, he made him put on the gown which was hanging to the wall, and also a cap with gay ribbons that lay upon a chest of drawers. "And now go forth, you miserable coward!" exclaimed Tash, laughing tauntingly as he opened the door and pushed out the unhappy colonel into the passage.

But here we must pause for a few minutes, in order to return to Jessica after she left Malpas and went to seek her mistress in the boudoir. There she found Venetia seated

alone, very far from suspecting the many incidents and episodes that were growing out of the main adventure which she had planned for this memorable night.

On beholding her abigail enter, Venetia turned indolently around upon the sofa where she was more reclining than sitting, and said, " Well, I suppose it is all right? "

" Heavens! no, my lady," was the startling response.

" Ah! what then is the matter? " demanded Venetia, now springing from the sofa as she observed the singular expression of the faithful Jessica's looks.

" I cannot comprehend it," was the abigail's quick response. " The key is gone, the door is still locked, and Mrs. Malpas, from inside the room, declares she has changed her mind."

" What! " cried Venetia, in dismay, " is it possible? "

" Yes, and she says that the colonel may go whence he came," added Jessica.

" But you must be dreaming, you must have gone to the wrong room."

" Impossible, my lady; 'tis the spare bedroom."

" Yes, but you must have misunderstood Mrs. Malpas, then," said Venetia, catching at any hypothesis to account for the extraordinary tale she had just heard from Jessica's lips.

" I can assure your ladyship that it is as I say," rejoined the maid.

" And the colonel, where is he? " demanded Venetia, quickly.

" I have left him standing in the passage while I came to ask your instructions. What is to be done? "

" I know not, I am bewildered," responded Venetia. " But, at all events, the colonel must not be left there. Go and get him away, induce him to depart. Invent some excuse, say anything. Tell him to come and see me tomorrow. Haste, haste, Jessica! He must not be allowed to loiter there."

The abigail issued from the boudoir, closing the door behind her. But the moment she thus emerged into the passage she saw that it was empty. No one was there. She hesitated what to do, and she was about to return into the boudoir and report this new circumstance to Venetia, when it struck her that the colonel might have been afraid to

tarry in the passage any longer and had sought his way back to the private door. But as Jessica had locked that door and kept the key in her possession when she gave him admittance ere now, she at once felt the necessity of hastening thither to afford him egress. But on arriving at the private door she saw no one, and again pausing for a few moments, she reflected what was to be done now. Had he lost his way somewhere in the palace? This appeared most probable, and Jessica went wandering through every passage and corridor, to satisfy herself on the point. Thus did she lose nearly twenty minutes, during which the scene between the colonel and Captain Tash was taking place.

Let us now return to Venetia. When left alone in the boudoir by Jessica, she sat down again upon the sofa to reflect on the singular behaviour of Mrs. Malpas. When Venetia parted from that lady it was with the hope, as cordial as it seemed mutual, that the issue of the adventure would be satisfactory, and indeed all Lady Sackville's previous tutorings had been received with the best possible grace by Mrs. Malpas. How, then, could she have so suddenly changed her mind? Was she a woman as vacillating as she was frivolous, as variable as she was weak-minded? To no other conclusion could Venetia come. But the key which had been placed under the mat, how had it disappeared? Even supposing that Mrs. Malpas had thought better of the matter and had resolved at the last moment not to play the part which she had undertaken, still she could not have possessed herself of the key to secure the door against the possibility of intrusion. She had been locked inside the room, and the key had been placed under the mat outside. It was therefore physically impossible she could have possessed herself of it. Then what had become of that key?

Venetia was utterly bewildered. She knew not what to think, and yet a vague and feebly glimmering suspicion was dawning in her mind that something had taken place beyond the scope of her present conjecture. Indeed, she could not help thinking that if anybody of the male sex had found the key, had penetrated into the chamber, and had made himself agreeable to Mrs. Malpas, the mystery would be cleared up at once. The reader is already aware that Lady Sackville was quick-witted, sharp, and intelligent beyond

even the ordinary shrewdness of her sex, and thus was it that she looked further than her first conjectures for a solution of the occurrence which had so much bewildered her.

Having once experienced the glimmering of suspicion, Venetia was not long in thinking of the means which would either confirm or refute it. Issuing from the boudoir, she crept stealthily along the passage, and was about to listen at Mrs. Malpas's door when the sounds of male voices, apparently in altercation and coming from the room opposite, somewhat alarmed her. These voices were in reality the colonel's and captain's, but as the door was shut, Venetia recognized them not. Wondering what was the meaning of that apparent quarrelling, and who the men could be, — for it was her housemaid's apartment whence the voices issued, — Venetia hurried back to her boudoir, for she did not choose to run the risk of being seen loitering about in the passage.

But now, why did not Jessica return? Where was she? What was she doing? What could be detaining her? Twenty minutes had elapsed, and still she returned not. Lady Sackville grew nervous and impatient. Those male voices in her housemaid's room had filled her with fresh misgivings, and she almost regretted that she had not entered to ascertain who the individuals were. Her uneasiness became intolerable, and she resolved to sally forth again in search of Jessica. But just at the moment when she opened the boudoir door a second time, she beheld what she took to be a female figure issue from her housemaid's room, and instantaneously recognizing that servant's cap and cotton dress, Venetia called her, in a peremptory manner, by name. She then turned hurriedly back into the boudoir, for her excitement was increased at the idea that the housemaid herself had been present in the room with the men, whoever they were, that had been speaking in such angry tones.

Here we must pause for a moment to observe that the housemaid was a very tall, gawky young woman, and thus was it that, in the excitement and confusion of her ideas, Venetia did not notice at the instant that the figure which emerged so suddenly from the room farther down the passage was much too tall even for the overgrown housemaid. But, on the other hand, what was the surprise of Colonel Malpas — for he it was, dressed in the female apparel — on

beholding Lady Sackville emerge, not from the room opposite, but from one higher up the passage? The colonel heard her pronounce a female name, followed by an imperious, "Come hither!" and he instantaneously perceived that it was he himself who was thus taken by Venetia for some servant-maid.

A sudden change came over the colonel, for he felt all in a moment that the opportunity was now serving him. A glance rapidly flung behind showed that the captain had closed the door of the little chamber on ignominiously kicking him out of it, for the gallant officer intended to remain concealed in that room at least until he thought the colonel had had time enough to get clear out of the palace, so that the authorship of this ludicrous sport might not be suspected. For Captain Rolando Tash had a certain opinion of his own dignity, and did not choose to compromise it by being discovered in the act of engendering such a practical joke as this.

Thus was it that all in a moment the wheel of fortune made a complete revolution, and circumstances transpired in favour of the colonel. Captain Tash had shut the door, Jessica was still prosecuting her search in other parts of the palace, and Venetia was in a room close at hand. Thither therefore did the colonel speed without another instant's hesitation, all his recent fears being absorbed in the hope of coming triumph. The moment he appeared on the threshold of the boudoir, Venetia, who had returned to her seat on the sofa, started up and gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and alarm, for at the very first moment that tall figure appeared in the doorway, she saw that it was not the housemaid, but a man in female apparel, and the next moment she recognized the colonel.

But even while that ejaculation was still thrilling from her lips, Malpas closed the door, locked it, and drew forth the key. Then, tearing off the cap and gown, he secured the key in his breeches pocket, exclaiming, in a tone of mingled malice and triumph, "Now, Venetia, you are in my power."

"Where have you been, and what means this masquerading frippery?" demanded Lady Sackville, still maintaining a bold front, although she felt that she was now entirely in the colonel's power.

" Ah! your ladyship was guilty of a cruel perfidiousness," exclaimed the colonel, " in letting that scoundrel Tash loose upon me. But enough of the past; the present absorbs all considerations."

" Tash, did you say? " exclaimed Venetia. " Have you, then, met the captain within these walls? "

" How can you pretend ignorance on that head? " rejoined Malpas. " Was not the villain posted in the very room opposite that where you were just now? Ah! you did not think it enough to make a dupe and a fool of me, and to tell me from inside the door of one room that you had changed your mind, but you must set that whiskered bravo to lay wait in another room to steal forth, pounce upon me when your maid left me, and then, after the most terrible threats, compel me to put on this debasing attire. Ah! Lady Sackville, it was too bad, it was too bad! But the moment of triumph, I might almost say revenge, has now come."

And thus speaking he literally sprang upon Venetia, threw his arms around her splendid neck, and despite her struggles, covered her face, her shoulders, and her bosom with his hot and burning kisses.

" Release me, villain! " she said, in accents half-stifled with rage, " or I will scream."

" Scream, then," cried Malpas. " Bring the whole household hither, and I will proclaim all I know, — that Curzon is your paramour — "

" O villain that you are! " exclaimed Venetia, now seeming like a tigress goaded to fury. " But I will have a terrible revenge," and flinging him from her with a force which would even have been tremendous for a man and was perfectly marvellous for a woman, she sprang toward the table where a silver fruit-knife was laying.

Malpas, whose passions of revenge, malignity, and desire were all aroused to the highest pitch, was armed with that brutish energy which, under such circumstances, supplies the place of real courage on the part of the coward, and he was perfectly desperate in his resolve to gratify his maddening impulses. Quick as thought did he divine her intention as she sprang to the table, and bounding forward even more swiftly than she, he clutched the knife.

" Venetia," he cried, instantaneously turning upon

her and brandishing the knife over her head, "I am desperate, you have goaded me to madness, your insults — "

"For God's sake, be reasonable, Malpas," she exclaimed, her cheek now growing pale with terror as she saw indeed that he was furiously excited.

"Don't talk to me of reason," he said, in a voice that was hoarse with concentrated passions. "Yield yourself to me, or, by all the powers of hell, I swear — "

"Put away that knife, I beseech, I implore you," cried Venetia, fearful that he was really going mad.

"No," he rejoined, in the same thick, hoarse accents as before, "for you are so experienced in trickery — Besides," he suddenly exclaimed, in a clearer and more excited voice, "I know full well that you will not surrender yourself through love, and that therefore it must be through fear."

"But if I do surrender, will you keep all my secrets?" asked Venetia, scarcely able to repress the accents of anguish and despair which rose up from her very heart's core to mingle with the tones of her voice.

"Assume a friendly demeanour toward me," answered Malpas, in a milder manner than before, "and I shall be friendly toward you. Ah! dear lady, if we could only forget the past and enjoy the present, the future should never be embittered, so far as you are concerned, by word or deed of mine."

"I accept the assurance," responded Venetia, whose feelings at this moment were not enviable even by a person about to be hanged, "and I surrender. Hush, hush!" she immediately added, in a lower voice, "some one is at the door."

"No treachery, mind," said the colonel, in a deep whisper, as he clutched her violently by the arm.

"You shall see whether I intend it," rejoined Venetia. Then as a second rap was heard at the door, she advanced toward it, and said, "Is it you, Jessica?"

"Yes, my lady," was the answer given by the abigail outside.

"You may retire," Venetia immediately said; "there is nothing more to be done to-night."

Having thus spoken, the proud, the brilliant, the envied,

and the worshipped Lady Sackville turned toward the man whom she detested, and on whom she now cast her troubled, humiliated, and submissive looks with an air as if she were gazing upon destiny itself.

CHAPTER XII

THE HUSBAND'S RETURN

We must now direct the reader's attention to Lord Sackville, whom we have seen sallying forth at about half-past ten on this memorable night in consequence of a letter which he received. That billet, written in an elegant female hand and so sweetly perfumed, was from the Countess of Curzon, and ran as follows:

"Ten o'clock at night.

"It is absolutely necessary, my dear Horace, that I should see you to-night; and as we must have a long conversation together, perhaps you will be enabled to afford me the pleasure of your society for a few hours. The usual arrangements can be carried into effect, so that the domestics need not suspect anything. Gertrude, who will deliver this note at Carlton House, will afterward proceed to our amiable and accommodating friend's in North Audley Street, where I shall be presently. You understand?

"If you cannot come, then must you send me a note making some appointment for to-morrow. It is absolutely necessary we should meet as early as possible.

"Your affectionate

"Editha."

Such were the contents of the note which Lord Sackville had received in the manner already described, and leaving the prince and Captain Tash to amuse each other, he at once issued forth from the palace. Taking a hackney-coach in Pall Mall, he ordered it to drive to North Audley Street; and on arriving there, he directed the coachman to turn into the little by-street into which the convenient side door of Lady Lechmere's house opened.

Not many minutes was Lord Sackville kept waiting, for the side door was presently opened, and forth came a lady enveloped in the ample cloak and the thick veil belonging to Gertrude. The moment she stepped into the vehicle, Sackville ordered the coachman to drive to Oxford Street, and as the man hastened to obey the instructions thus given, Horace and Editha commenced the hurried conversation which we are about to record.

But we must pause for one single moment to observe that as the hackney-coach rumbled away out of the narrow street, a young man, who had hitherto remained concealed in a doorway a little farther down, and who had been intently watching what was taking place, emerged forth from his concealment and followed in the track of the vehicle.

We now return to the tender pair who are ensconced inside the hackney-coach which the young man was thus pursuing.

" My dear friend," said the countess, throwing up the veil and exchanging fervid kisses with her paramour, " a crisis has now arrived."

" Ah! your husband, the earl? " said Sackville, throwing his arms around her and drawing her close to him as the hackney-coach rumbled along.

" I have received a letter from him to say that he will be home to-morrow evening," continued Editha. " The letter was brought by hand. It was sent through his banker, or lawyer, I suppose — "

" When did you receive it? " asked Lord Sackville, quickly.

" This evening, at about nine o'clock," returned Editha.

" And whence is it dated? "

" From Dover. It says that he has returned home through Belgium, by way of Ostend."

" And he intimates that he shall be home to-morrow night? " asked Sackville, in a voice which showed that some unpleasant misgiving had sprung up in his mind.

" Yes, to-morrow night," responded Editha. " The letter states that he is so ill through seasickness experienced during a rough passage from Ostend to Dover that he is compelled to remain a day at the latter place — "

" Editha," interrupted Lord Sackville, in a tone of alarm, " we are betrayed by some means or another; treachery is intended."

" Ah! now you terrify me," exclaimed the countess, in accents of dismay.

" Did no suspicion strike you when you received that letter? " asked Lord Sackville. " Situated as you are with your husband, and with the great coolness existing between you, it is not probable that he would write you a letter of such a character unless it were meant to throw you off your guard and cover some deep design which he has formed. How often has he written to you during this nearly five months' absence of his upon the Continent? "

" Only twice, and then in the most laconic manner," answered the countess. " Indeed, I showed you his letters. One from Milan, the other from Geneva — "

" And they both stated that you need not write to him in reply, as his movements were so uncertain he could not be assured of remaining long enough at any one place to receive answers from England? "

" And accordingly," rejoined Editha, " I never did write to him during his absence — "

" An absence," added Lord Sackville, " for which he condescended to allege no reason."

" An absence indeed," said Editha, " as unaccountable as the journey itself was suddenly undertaken. But of all that I do not complain, — I have no right to complain, — and you well know why," she added, in a tone of mingled tenderness and melancholy.

" Yes, dearest Editha, I do indeed now feel that matters are approaching a crisis," responded Sackville, also with alarm in his tone. " Depend upon it that at this very moment some danger is hanging over our heads, or we are about to fall into some snare that is set for us. Instead of your husband returning to-morrow night, I will stake my existence that he will be back to-night. Perhaps he has already arrived. Ah! I can see it all. Suspecting you, he thinks that such a letter as he has written will produce the very effect which it has indeed produced, namely, to prompt you to make the most of the few hours that thus seem to be yours previous to his return to-morrow night."

" Yes, yes, I partake all your terrors, I see it all in the same light as yourself," said Editha, who was truly unhappy. " Indeed when that letter came at nine o'clock this evening, delivered by some messenger who immediately departed, I

was filled with misgivings, and Gertrude also shared them. Ah! the faithful and intelligent girl. She besought me not to think of seeing you to-night, but I was bewildered, I was frenzied, I was driven half-mad at the prospect of disgrace, and my agitated feelings got the better of my prudence, so that I sent for you."

"Well, dearest Editha," said Horace, "whatever mischief is done cannot now be recalled."

"And besides," resumed the unhappy lady, with a sort of hysterical quickness, "suppose that our fears are unfounded, that the earl really will not return until to-morrow, and that there is no pitfall dug to entrap us, it is but a postponement for a short space, perhaps only a few hours, for exposure, scandal, and ruin must come at last."

"Yes, you speak but too truly, my poor Editha," said Horace, straining her to his breast and kissing away the tears that were now trickling down her cheeks. "Four months and a half he has been absent — "

"And three months am I advanced in the way to become a mother," murmured Editha, in accents broken by half-stifled sobs. "Oh," she suddenly exclaimed, in a paroxysm of hysterical excitement, "disgrace must inevitably overtake me. It cannot be avoided. It is impossible the earl can be made to believe that he is the father of the child I bear in my bosom, and, as I have already told you, his suspicions were awakened even previous to his departure — "

"Think you that he has ever been absent at all?" asked Sackville, suddenly. "What if the two laconic letters received from Milan and Geneva were posted in those cities by some friend to whom your husband sent them? What if all the while he has been concealed in London, watching the progress of our amour — "

"No, I do not fancy that for a moment," answered Editha. "Besides, even if it were so, our precautions have been so well taken, we might defy all his pryings and peerings; for not even do the very domestics suspect that I have once slept away from the house or once done aught which a lady of virtue might not do. But it is my position that threatens me with exposure."

"Then what is to be done?" asked Lord Sackville, evidently much bewildered and alarmed. "What would you have me do, dearest Editha?"

"I know not — I know not," responded the countess, sobbing in his arms. "Never, never was I so unhappy as I am at this moment. I seem to have lost all courage — all energy, and I feel that the moment is at hand when my name is to be added to that catalogue of family depravity, scandal, and disgrace, in which the names of so many of my nearest relatives already figure."

"Sustain your fortitude, I implore you," said Horace, in his most soothing tones, and accompanying his words with the tenderest caresses.

At this moment the hackney-coach stopped in that part of Oxford Street which is close to Soho Square, and Lady Curzon drew down her veil ere her paramour handed her forth from the vehicle. Then, dismissing the hackney-coach, Horace gave the trembling Editha his arm, and conducted her hastily to the fashionable house of infamy kept by Mrs. Gale in Soho Square.

Two or three times, as they thus passed from Oxford Street to the house alluded to, did Lord Sackville turn his head to ascertain whether any one was following them, but he saw nothing to excite his suspicion that such was the case. And yet that young man who had followed the hackney-coach from the by-street by the side of Lady Lechmere's dwelling had never once lost sight of the vehicle; but, aided by the street lamps, he had kept it in view, and as it did not proceed at a pace calculated to outstrip him, he had no difficulty in thus keeping in its track, till it stopped in Oxford Street. Then, on beholding the gentleman and lady alight, the young man continued to follow them at such a distance as to elude observation when Horace turned his head, as above stated.

Thus was it that the spy kept Lord Sackville and the guilty countess in view, until they entered Mrs. Gale's establishment; and then he posted himself at some little distance, but at a point whence he could maintain a strict watch upon the front door of the house of infamy.

We must now return to North Audley Street.

At the very moment that the hackney-coach, containing Lord Sackville and Editha, rolled away, followed by the young man, the Earl of Curzon himself knocked at the door of Lady Lechmere's house.

" Is her ladyship at home? " he inquired of the domestic who immediately answered the summons.

" Yes, my lord," was the reply.

" And I believe that the Countess of Curzon is with her? " said the earl, assuming an air as if nothing were wrong.

" Yes, my lord," was again the reply. " Her ladyship the countess arrived about a quarter of an hour ago."

" Ah! so I understood in Grosvenor Street," said the earl, alluding to his own mansion. " I have only just returned from the Continent, and learned that the countess had come to pass the evening with Lady Lechmere. Did you happen to hear at what hour the countess ordered the carriage to return for her? "

" At midnight, my lord," answered the livery servant, " But here is my mistress."

At this moment Lady Lechmere, who had heard the double knock at the door, was seen descending the stairs, and a shade suddenly passed over her countenance as she caught sight of the Earl of Curzon. But instantaneously recovering her presence of mind, she extended her hand with a graceful smile, saying, " And so your lordship has returned from your Continental trip? But pray walk in," and she conducted him into a parlour opening from the hall.

" Your ladyship is very kind," said the earl, as she desired him to be seated, " but — "

" Oh, if you are in a hurry, I will not attempt to detain you," she exclaimed, with well-affected self-possession, though in her heart she experienced a misgiving. " When did you come home? for I understood that you were not expected until to-morrow evening."

" But it suited me, my lady," said the earl, with a peculiar smile of malignity and in a tone of irony which enchanced Lady Lechmere's uneasiness, — " it suited me to return earlier than I was expected. I believe Editha is with you? "

" Yes, she is come to pass the evening with me," said Lady Lechmere, her looks now again betraying her confusion. " But to tell you the real truth," she added, " your dear countess, whom I love as if she were my own daughter, has been suddenly seized with a slight indisposition. There is no danger, — it will soon pass away, — but she has gone up-stairs to lie down for an hour or so — "

"Indeed!" remarked the earl, with increasing irony of tone. "She must have been seized very suddenly, for it can scarcely be a quarter of an hour since she entered your ladyship's house."

"Yes, it was very sudden," returned the wily and dissolute patrician lady, who, having been an utter profligate during her own youthful years, had now become, on the shady side of existence, a base pander to the profligacies of others. "But you do not look well, Lord Curzon. Will you take some wine? I have the most delicious champagne —"

"I thank your ladyship, but I would rather not," answered the earl, in a cold tone and with a stiff bow. Then, in a peculiar accent and with a look of ominous meaning, he said, "Of course my dear wife is most anxious to see me, and your ladyship can well understand that I am equally desirous to fold her in my embrace. Perhaps you will permit me to see her?"

"But she is fast asleep," exclaimed Lady Lechmere, scarcely able to conceal her fright. "Surely you would not disturb her?"

"There is no necessity to disturb her," said the earl, with a most provoking persistence in his object, so that Lady Lechmere suddenly conceived so bitter a hatred for him, she could almost have assassinated him on the spot, — that is to say, if she had a weapon ready at hand. "There is no necessity to disturb her, I repeat," continued the earl, "I will enter the room on tiptoe."

"But, my lord," said the infamous woman, now trembling visibly, "what would be thought by the servants if they saw me conducting you up-stairs to that part of the house where the bedchambers are situated?"

"What could they think, madam," asked Lord Curzon, with an ironical smile, "except that I was going to the room where my wife was lying indisposed?"

"But the world is so very wicked," rejoined Lady Lechmere, battling hard to dissuade the nobleman from his purpose.

"Your ladyship forces me by this ridiculous argument," said the earl, "to remind you that what might have been probable ten or fifteen years ago is not by any means so likely now," and he gazed with a significant look upon the

lady as he thus reminded her that she was considerably on the shady side of forty.

"Ah! is your lordship so ungallant as to hint that I am getting old?" she exclaimed, affecting a tone of good-tempered remonstrance.

"Let us not diverge from the subject of our discourse," said the earl. "If you be really afraid of scandalous tongues, let one of your maids accompany us to the room where Editha is lying asleep."

"But the doctor has declared that she must not be disturbed," exclaimed Lady Lechmere, thus making a desperate attempt to clinch the matter at once.

"What! is my wife so bad that the doctor has been sent for?" exclaimed Curzon, superciliously.

"It is positively so," responded Lady Lechmere, with a new accession of courage, and therefore meeting the earl's look with a brazen effrontery.

"Well, upon my word," he cried, laughing in bitter mockery, "this is the most curious thing I ever knew in my life. Here have we my Editha, who, before she has been a quarter of an hour under your ladyship's roof on the present occasion, has been seized with illness, conveyed to a couch, visited by the doctor, fallen into a sound sleep— And I suppose that even the doctor himself has gone? Really, I do not believe that so much was ever summed up in so short a space before."

"I do not understand this tone and manner which your lordship thinks fit to assume," said Lady Lechmere, who, finding that cajolery, remonstrance, and effrontery had all been used in vain, now as a last resource adopted an air of indignation. "What interest have I in deceiving your lordship? For what do you take me? And how dare you come with such a demeanour to my house?"

"Ah! since your ladyship puts the matter upon this footing," exclaimed the earl, "it is necessary that I should speak out. Indeed we have been standing here trifling with each other too long. All this fencing with excuses is useless on your part, and therefore let us bandy words no more. Madam," he said, suddenly assuming a stern and resolute look, "I demand instantaneously to see my wife."

"And I declare, my lord," replied Lady Lechmere,

adopting an aspect of defiance, " that you shall not do as you like beneath my roof."

" Then you will force me to create a scandal and an uproar in the house, by pushing my way in spite of opposition to the chamber where, as you allege, my wife is lying down," and as the earl thus spoke, he took up his hat and turned toward the door.

" My lord, you cannot, you would not, you dare not do this," faltered Lady Lechmere, now terribly alarmed.

" I will do it, on my soul, madam, I will do it," exclaimed Curzon. " Now decide — will you conduct me to that chamber? Or shall I find my way thither by myself? And perhaps," he added, with a look of peculiar malignity, " it will not be so difficult as you fancy. Let me see? Up two pair of stairs, then along a carpeted passage, into a bed-chamber where a second door communicates with a back staircase, and in that staircase there is a signal bell, and at the bottom a door opening into the by-street — "

" Good heavens! " cried Lady Lechmere, turning ghastly pale as the Earl of Curzon thus gave utterance to those details which displayed his perfect knowledge of the privacies of her dwelling-house, for the reader will remember that Colonel Malpas had given the earl a full account of all these matters at the hotel at Lausanne.

" Ah! I thought that I should produce some effect upon your ladyship," exclaimed Curzon, enjoying her confusion. " Now will you hesitate to conduct me thither? "

Lady Lechmere rose from her seat, accosted the earl with haggard looks and convulsing form, and placing one of her trembling hands upon his arm, said, in a low, thick voice, " Tell me how you know all this — tell me who has been the betrayer."

" Well, I do not know why I should keep the secret," said the earl, " and indeed I may answer your question if it be only to prove how entirely everything is known to me. Learn, then, that from the lips of one of my wife's paramours — Colonel Malpas."

" The villain! I always knew he would betray her," ejaculated Lady Lechmere. " You are aware, then," she continued, her voice again becoming thick and hesitating, " that your wife — "

" Is not beneath your roof at this moment," exclaimed the

earl, " but that Gertrude is here in her stead, and that when the carriage comes at midnight, then Gertrude, dressed as her mistress and closely veiled, will enter the vehicle and be driven home to Grosvenor Street. Such," added the earl, with bitter irony, " are the precautions adopted to prevent my lackeys, coachman, and grooms from even suspecting the freaks and pranks of her profligate mistress. I must say that if every lady of fashion and rank were equally cunning in devising measures to lull suspicion asleep and defy detection, the public would miss many and many a rich treat of crim. con. which the public journals serve up in so enticing a manner."

" Now, my dear lord, be reasonable, expose not your wife," urged Lady Lechmere. " Only reflect — "

" Ay, but I wish in the first instance," said the earl, with a look of deep meaning, " to take my revenge on that minx Gertrude, who has so long and so successfully pandered to Editha's depravities."

" And the revenge which you propose to take? " said Lady Lechmere, inquiringly.

" Oh, it is my intention to fall into the spirit of the frolic," said the earl, with a forced laugh, " and treat her exactly as if I believed her really to be my wife. No matter if the room be blazing with lights, I shall affect to be so blind as to judge by the apparel and not by the features. For that Editha and Gertrude have changed dresses up in that room, I have no doubt. Now, madam," added the earl, suddenly throwing off his air of bantering irony and assuming a peremptory tone and manner, " I enjoin you, without another word of remonstrance, to accompany me to that chamber, which, if you refuse, I can so well find for myself."

Lady Lechmere, seeing that there was no alternative, and hoping that the earl meant to limit his proceedings to the pleasant vengeance which he proposed to wreak upon Gertrude, led the way from the parlour. Having conducted his lordship up the two flight of stairs, she led him along the carpeted passage; but when within a few yards of the door at the end, she paused, and said, in a low whisper, " Shall I go in advance to prepare the girl for your appearance? "

" Not at all, my lady, it is not necessary," at once answered the earl. " I presume the door is unlocked? "

"Yes," replied Lady Lechmere. "But I thought you wished me to accompany you?"

"Not farther than this point," immediately rejoined the earl, and opening a door which fronted the spot where they had thus halted, he said, in a quick, peremptory whisper, "Your ladyship will please to walk in here, for I see that the room is unoccupied."

"But what on earth do you mean?" asked Lady Lechmere, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"I mean simply that I am going to lock your ladyship in here for an hour, while I talk to Gertrude in the other room. Because," continued the earl, "to tell you the truth, I do not choose you to have the opportunity of sending off a message to warn my delectable wife at Mrs. Gale's of my presence and proceedings here this night. She fancies, no doubt, that I shall not return until to-morrow, and in that belief let her remain."

"But, my lord, you cannot think of imprisoning me here for an entire hour?" said Lady Lechmere, in a low voice so as to avoid being overheard.

"No harm can arise," rejoined the earl, who seemed to have an answer ready for every remonstrance. "It is only eleven o'clock, and the countess ordered the carriage for twelve. This interval of an hour you would have passed in yonder room with Gertrude, if I had not come to interrupt your proceedings; therefore you will not be missed by the domestics."

Again did Lady Lechmere see that the Earl of Curzon was resolute in carrying his purposes into execution, and dreading an exposure which would cover her with disgrace and infamy by revealing herein the true light of a patrician demirep and procuress, she resigned herself to the hour's captivity in the bedroom, the door of which Curzon now locked upon her. Then putting the key into his pocket, the earl hastened on to the end of the passage, and opening the door, he entered the room where Gertrude, dressed in the costume of the countess, was reclining negligently upon a sofa.

CHAPTER XIII

THE EARL'S VENGEANCE

It was the custom of Lady Lechmere, whenever these manœuvrings were going on with respect to Editha and Gertrude, to remain in the room which thus so conveniently served the purpose of the intrigue, and this she did not only to sustain the idea amongst her dependents that she was thus closeted for hours together with her bosom friend the Countess of Curzon, but likewise to guard against any intrusion into this chamber. Gertrude, therefore, always felt completely at her ease and was lulled into perfect security whe ever she was thus performing the part of her mistress at Lady Lechmere's house.

On the present occasion the handsome young lady's-maid, dressed in a velvet robe belonging to her mistress, was reclining negligently upon the sofa as the Earl of Curzon entered the room. As he opened the door quietly and without violence, Gertrude thought it was Lady Lechmere coming back, and she did not immediately turn her head. But as the earl stood still to survey the half-recumbent form of the good-looking Gertrude, she wondered that Lady Lechmere (as she fancied it to be) should have stopped short; and suddenly looking around, she gave vent to an ejaculation of dismay as she recognized her master.

"Ah! my dear Editha," said the earl, affecting to believe that it was his wife; and as he at once advanced toward the sofa, he purposely overturned a little work-table on which stood the two wax lights. Then, as the candles were thus suddenly extinguished and utter darkness prevailed all in a moment, he placed himself on the sofa and took Gertrude in his arms, saying, "I beg you ten thousand pardons, my dear Editha, for my awkwardness in thus upsetting the

table and putting out the lights. We can, however, converse just as comfortably in the dark. But why do you tremble?" and he covered the cheeks and lips of the lady's-maid with kisses.

For the moment Gertrude was completely bewildered. Could it be possible that the earl had failed, in the rapid glance he threw upon her, to observe that it was not his wife, but her maid; and was it purely through accident that he had upset the table? Such were the questions which Gertrude rapidly asked herself. But how could she answer them? Indeed she knew not what to think.

"My dear Editha," continued the nobleman, indulging in certain little amorous licenses and tender dalliances which Gertrude dared not resist, "it strikes me that you are cruel and unkind after my long absence from you. What! not a word — not a kiss. Come, if you will not speak, at all events press your lips to mine."

And as he thus spoke he strained Gertrude to his breast in such a manner that, as their lips met, the abigail could not withdraw herself from the warm and exciting contact even if she were inclined.

"There! now I know by these kisses," continued the earl, after several long and fervid caresses which he bestowed, and which Gertrude gave back again, — "now I know that you are not indifferent to my return. It is, however, an unexpected pleasure that I should find you thus amiable as to receive my caresses with so much fervour and give them back with kindred warmth. Let us say nothing of the past. I will not inquire what you have been doing during my absence, and you must not seek to know of me what I have been doing on the Continent. Therefore let no disagreeable thoughts mar our present enjoyment."

And still, as he spoke, he held Gertrude in his embrace, bestowing upon her such caresses as gave unmistakable proof of his ultimate intentions. Gertrude, although so thoroughly experienced in the ways of the world, — so full of duplicity, and with such a genius for intrigue, — had, nevertheless, retained her chastity; but her passions were strong, and they were now gradually being excited by this contact, in the dark, with a man, who, though she liked him not, possessed a handsome exterior. Moreover, on a former occasion, we have seen Gertrude willing to abandon

herself to the earl in order to save her mistress, and she was not the less inclined to do so on the present occasion. But still she asked herself, was it possible that the earl really believed her to be his wife? Or was all that he was now saying but a portion of some deeply settled scheme of revenge?

" Now you will believe that I have grown quite uxorious, my dear Editha," he continued, " and you may think, perhaps, that I seem rather like a lover than a husband. Well, be it so. You are beautiful, your temperament is warm and voluptuous, you have every qualification to fit you for the pleasures of love. Wonder not, therefore, if I thus rejoice at the opportunity which enables me to revel in your arms immediately on my return."

And now, as his own passions were worked up to an irresistible degree, the kisses which he bestowed upon Gertrude became more ardent, more fervid, so that his companion was inspired with the same volcano-like passion which now animated himself.

But we need dwell no longer upon this scene; suffice it to say, that the Earl of Curzon continued to affect the belief that he was really with his wife instead of Gertrude, and that the young woman, excited in her passions and bewildered in her ideas, surrendered up her person to her master.

It was now close upon midnight, and Lord Curzon, gently disengaging himself from the embrace in which Gertrude held him, for it was she who had become amorous and tender now, said, " I believe you ordered the carriage at twelve? Come, put on your cloak and let us depart."

Gertrude, now more than ever wondering whether Lord Curzon really fancied that she was his wife, or whether he was still playing a studied part, felt about the room for the cloak which her mistress had left there for her use, and having put it on, she drew the hood far down over her countenance, as was her wont on these occasions."

" Now, dearest Editha," said the earl, still speaking in the kindest possible tone, " give me your arm."

Gertrude did so, not knowing what on earth was to be the end of the present adventure, for her heart was beating with the lingering sense of passion's rapture, and also with vague misgivings of what might yet be coming. The earl threw open the door of the room, and they emerged forth

from the darkness into the passage which was well lighted; and now from within the depths of her hood did Gertrude fling a quick, searching, and anxious glance upon the earl.

"Dearest Editha, how happy do I feel with you to-night!" he said, in a tone of such well-assumed tenderness and sincerity that Gertrude was still more confused and bewildered than ever, for though he met the quick and sidelong glance which she threw up at him, he did not appear to notice that it was not the countenance of his wife.

"What can it mean?" asked Gertrude within herself. "Does he actually take me for his Editha? Or is it all a horrible mockery which must presently end in some suddenly outbreaking storm? His conduct is not natural; no, it is not natural. He must have known that it was not his wife whom he ere now clasped in his arms."

The girl's musings were suddenly cut short by an observation which Lord Curzon now made.

"By the bye," he exclaimed, "that dear, amiable, kind-hearted Lady Lechmere, who has been the means of procuring me this pleasant *tête-à-tête* with my own dear wife, said that she would wait in this room."

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon stopped suddenly at a door in the passage, and unlocking it so quickly that Gertrude, whose head was muffled in the hood of the cloak, could scarcely tell whether it had been thus fastened or not, he threw open the door.

"Now, my dear Lady Lechmere," he immediately said, as the patrician procuress hastily came forth, "we are going to take our departure. I can assure you that my sweet Editha and myself have passed an hour of unfeigned enjoyment. Strange as such a *tête-à-tête* between husband and wife may seem at the house of a friend instead of beneath their own roof, it nevertheless has its advantages; for I can assure you, my dear Lady Lechmere, that on the present occasion Editha and I have so completely made up all past differences that we are better friends than on the day we were married. This temporary absence of mine has been beneficial in making us each reflect upon our little faults and failings toward one another, and, henceforth, we mean to prove an example to society, — a true pattern couple."

Thus speaking, in a hurried manner, but with a cheerful air, Lord Curzon, who had given an arm to Lady Lechmere,

conducted the two females along the passage, — Gertrude on his right, Lady Lechmere on his left; and all the time he kept his looks so divided, as it were, between them both, that they could find no opportunity of exchanging significant glances. Thus Lady Lechmere, who understood full well all the horrible bantering which ran through the earl's observations, was not able either to breathe a syllable, or throw a look that might prepere Gertrude for the winding up of this strange drama. On her part, the young woman was still a prey to an uncertainty that every instant grew more painful; but, as the earl still continued to treat her as if she were really the countess, she, of course, sustained the part by keeping the hood drawn over her countenance.

The earl continued to talk in the same strain as before, while he conducted his two female companions down the staircase, and, as he came within the hearing of the footman who was in the hall, he said, with all the appearance of the most genuine sincerity, " I am sure, my dear Lady Lechmere, the countess must feel deeply grateful for the kind interest which you experience in her. I am sure that these evenings which she passes at your house are the happiest in her life. But, my dear Editha," he suddenly exclaimed, turning toward Gertrude, " how you muffle yourself up! Here, at the end of April, too, — when it is quite warm, — I am sure it must be very unwholesome. At all events, throw back the hood."

And suiting the action to the word, the earl raised his hand so quickly, and drew back the hood so abruptly, that Gertrude had not even time to anticipate the proceeding, and thus, all in a moment, was the countenance of the lady's-maid revealed to the astonished footman who stood holding the front door open.

" Heavens! " ejaculated the Earl of Curzon, now affecting to be struck with dismay. " What does this mean? "

Gertrude, deadly pale, stood transfixed to the spot, while Lady Lechmere gave utterance to a groan of anguish, and sank down senseless at the foot of the stairs.

" What means all this, I demand? " exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, pretending to be almost frantic. " Look — behold — here is my wife's maid, decked out in her mistress's apparel, even to the very cloak with the hood. Ah! what a convenient hood! "

Lady Lechmere's footman, who stood at the hall door, gazed with stupid astonishment upon this scene; for he, of ocurse, had never supposed but that it was always the countess herself whom the carriage had been wont to fetch, and who was accustomed to trip forth so well muffled up in that cloak and hood. The lackey, who was in attendance upon the carriage which had just arrived, hearing the strange exclamations to which his master was giving vent, peeped into the hall, and became a witness of the scene. To the coachman, who was seated on the box, did he hurriedly communicate what he thus beheld, and that functionary, leaping down, also looked into the hall to gratify his curiosity.

Indescribable was the scene of confusion which now followed. Gertrude, after standing for nearly a minute, gazing in speechless horror upon the earl, fell into strong hysterics; for she now understood and experienced a full sense of the terrible revenge which her master was bent upon this night executing, and the first fury of which had overtaken Lady Lechmere and herself.

Leaving the servants to pay such attention as they chose to the mistress of the house, who had fainted, and to Gertrude, who was screaming in a fit, the Earl of Curzon sped forth from the hall.

"You see that your mistress is not here," he said, in a tone of well-affected bitterness, as he encountered his coachman and lackey on the door-steps. "But did you both mark well that it was the vile Gertrude who has adopted this stratagem to shield her still viler lady?" Then, without waiting for a reply, the nobleman jumped into the carriage, saying, "Perhaps we shall find the countess somewhere else. Drive to Soho Square."

The carriage door was banged, the coachman clambered on his box, the lackey sprang up behind, and away rolled the equipage. We need hardly say that the two domestics were astounded at what had just taken place. Although they had often thought it odd that when they went to fetch the countess, at Lady Lechmere's house, she should on every occasion, without a single exception, be so closely hooded or so carefully veiled, yet never had they entertained the slightest suspicion that it was not the countess whom the carriage on those occasions conveyed home. Now, how-

ever, that the explosion had taken place, they recollected many little circumstances which they wondered had not opened their eyes before as to the stratagem so artfully carried on by their mistress and her maid. On this point, however, we need not dwell; suffice it to say, that the coachman and the lackey were highly delighted at the prospect of so fine a piece of scandal and so glorious an action for crim. con. against some one or another, which they now saw to be the inevitable results of this night's adventure.

By half-past twelve Soho Square was reached, and the earl ordered the carriage to stop at a little distance from Mrs. Gale's. The moment the coachman reined in his horses, that same young man who had hitherto been keeping watch in the vicinage hastened up to the carriage, and, approaching the window, said in a hurried tone of inquiry, " The earl? "

" Yes," replied that nobleman. " What news, Theodore? "

" They are here," said Varian, glancing around toward Mrs. Gale's house, over the front door of which a lamp was burning.

" The countess and Emmerson? " said the earl, quickly.

" I have no doubt of it," was Varian's response.

" But your answer," exclaimed Curzon, " seems to imply a doubt. Are you not certain — "

" I posted myself where your lordship told me, in the by-street," Theodore hastened to explain, " and I saw a female, closely veiled and cloaked, come forth from Lady Lechmere's side door. All took place as your lordship had led me to suppose. A hackney-coach was waiting, into which she entered, and it drove away. I followed it to Oxford Street, I saw a gentleman and lady alight, I pursued them at a distance, and lost not sight of them till they entered Mrs. Gale's door. Here I have since remained, and they have not come out again."

" Good! they are caught in a net," ejaculated the earl. " But why did you at first speak in a doubting manner as to the identity of the parties? "

" I am not aware that I did, my lord," replied Theodore Varian, " unless it were, perhaps, because you so positively asked me whether I was sure it was the countess and Emmerson. Now, I could not be positive, because the lady appeared closely veiled as she came forth from Lady Lechmere's house, and after she and her companion alighted in Oxford

Street, I dared not approach them too closely, for fear they might see that they were followed, and this would have spoilt all."

"But you are certain that the man was Emmerson?" said the earl.

"No, my lord, I cannot possibly be certain of it," answered Varian. "I did not approach close enough to see."

"But, at all events," persisted Lord Curzon, "you are confident that you never lost sight of the hackney-coach from the time it left Lady Lechmere's until it stopped in Oxford Street?"

"I am confident on that head," replied Varian.

"Then I am equally confident," said the earl, "that the lady who issued forth from Lady Lechmere's was the countess. That her companion is Emmerson is most probable, unless, indeed," he murmured to himself, "she has got hold of another paramour, which, by the bye, is not unlikely. But no matter who he is."

Thus musing within himself, the earl alighted from the carriage, and bidding the coachman wait, he and Varian stepped up to Mrs. Gale's front door. The knock which they gave was immediately answered by a female servant, for no one who applied for admission during the night at that house was ever kept waiting. The moment they passed into the hall, the servant, to whom Lord Curzon was well known, looked somewhat terrified on recognizing him, for the woman instantaneously suspected that an explosion was about to take place in respect to the countess.

"My wife is up-stairs," said the earl, slipping a handful of guineas into the servant's hand. "Come, I know your discretion and prudence, as well as your trustworthiness, but it is no use denying the fact. My wife is up-stairs, I say."

"For Heaven's sake, don't make a noise, my lord," interrupted the servant-woman, in an imploring tone. "Besides, your lordship should remember that if you have been here now and then with a lady, surely your wife has an equal right to come here now and then with a gentleman?"

"Silence!" said the earl, sternly, "and now show me and my friend the way up to the room where my wife and her companion are. Not another word! Obey me, or I shall commence the search myself."

The idea that his lordship would go peeping into every room throughout the spacious establishment at once gave wings to the woman's feet, inasmuch as not for worlds would she have had the mysteries of the various apartments — or at least of two or three of them — violated by an intruder's gaze. For in one was a pious lady " whose praise was in all the churches," now sleeping in the arms of a private in the Horse-guards; in another was a bishop, renowned for his piety, who had brought thither a young girl of about fourteen or fifteen, whom he was initiating in the ways of wickedness; in a third apartment there was a judge, the sternest upon the bench, now in company with one of the most noted prostitutes about town; and in a fourth there was a young lady of high birth, great beauty, and extraordinary accomplishments, clasped in the arms of her foreign music-master.

No wonder, therefore, was it if the discreet servant of Mrs. Gale's establishment felt anxious to prevent the veil being drawn aside from these mysteries; and accordingly, without any further remonstrance or hesitation, did she lead the way up-stairs, followed by the Earl of Curzon and Theodore Varian.

" This is the door," she said, in a low whisper, as she paused at a particular chamber.

The Earl of Curzon's eyes now glowed with triumph, for he felt that the moment was come when he should be avenged upon Editha for all her former faithlessness toward him and all the treacheries which she had put in practice. Trying the handle of the door and finding that it was locked inside, as indeed he had of course anticipated, the earl unhesitatingly threw himself with all his force against it and burst it open. A scream of terror and an ejaculation of rage burst simultaneously from male and female lips within the room into which Lord Curzon immediately precipitated himself. Lights were burning upon the table, and by the aid thereof the countess and her paramour were at once discovered sitting up, in a startled manner, in the couch.

But that paramour, who was he? Not Emmerson the bill-broker, as the Earl of Curzon and Theodore Varian had alike hoped and expected, but the husband of the brilliant Venetia, the handsome and accomplished Lord Sackville!

"Create no disturbance in the house," said Horace, instantaneously precipitating himself from the bed, and speaking in a hurried manner to the Earl of Curzon. "To-morrow I shall be prepared to give you such satisfaction as you may demand."

Editha, covering her face with her hands, burst forth into a violent fit of sobbing, and Theodore Varian, so soon as he perceived that her ladyship's companion was not Emmerson, over whose exposure he had hoped to exult, withdrew upon the landing outside, through motives of delicacy.

The Earl of Curzon did not immediately reply to Sackville's remarks, but stood gazing upon him with a sort of stupid dismay for nearly a minute. It was not, however, that Curzon was so very much astonished at discovering who his wife's paramour for the occasion thus was, but it was because it instantaneously struck him that this was a visitation of retributive justice. For had not the Earl of Curzon intrigued with Sackville's wife, and how could the earl himself now complain of Sackville's intrigue with Editha? Such was the thought that struck him suddenly as if with a sense of dismay, and held him speechless. But Sackville, so far from suspecting what was thus passing in Curzon's mind at the moment, attributed the consternation of his looks to quite another source.

"Considering all the friendship that has subsisted between us, Lord Curzon," he said, in a tone of self-mortification and repentance, "you doubtless regard me as the perpetrator of an unparalleled atrocity?"

"Yes, my lord," responded the earl, instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, "in such a light do I indeed regard your conduct. But of course you shall hear from me so soon as satisfactory arrangements can be made." Then, turning toward Editha, he exclaimed, in a tone of malignant triumph, "At length I have detected your ladyship. Everything is known to me. Gertrude has ere now been unmasked in the presence of Lady Lechmere's servants and of mine —"

"Ah! then the scandal and the exposure are complete?" exclaimed the Countess of Curzon, in a voice broken with convulsive sobs; but the next instant, as if suddenly animated with a lightning flash, she sprang from the couch, and

in that state of seminudity she extended her bare and exquisitely rounded arm, crying, " 'Tis well, my lord! you have done your worst for the moment; you triumph doubtless. But whom is it that you thus crush? A poor weak woman, who loved you at first and who would have remained faithful to you ever, had not your neglect chagrined her and your infidelities alienated her affection from you. Can you wonder that I have gone wrong? Heaven is my witness that, with your example before my eyes, it would have been impossible for me to go right. But though you triumph now for the moment, yet may the tables be turned against you. In one respect, however, you will have your wish. You will get rid of a wife whom your constant profligacies render it inconvenient for you to keep, and whom your extravagancies make it impossible for you to maintain. From hence I depart at once, yes, and away from London I speed, perhaps from England altogether. One thing I implore you," she added, her voice suddenly becoming full of agitation and her looks replete with plaintive emotions, as she turned her eyes from her husband to her lover, and then back again on her husband, " and this is, that you will not endanger your lives for one so little worth that proceeding as I? "

" Madam," said the Earl of Curzon, who had listened with impatience to this speech, " of that matter I am the best judge."

Thus speaking, he turned abruptly away and haughtily quitted the room; but recollecting something, he again turned back and said, " The carriage which called for your ladyship at Lady Lechmere's now waits below and is at your service."

" Ah! even this crowning degradation has he put upon me, — to expose me to the very lackeys of our household! " exclaimed the countess, in a tone of rending bitterness, a tone in which the accents of grief penetrated no longer, but were displaced by those of vindictive hate and rage, for she felt that to have brought the carriage to that house of infamy whither he had traced her was an insult of so cowardly and atrocious a character that, bad though she might be, it exceeded all the bounds of legitimate chastisement.

Lord Curzon gave a scornful laugh in response to her

ejaculation of fury, and once more turning on his heel, he quitted the room.

On the landing he found Theodore Varian waiting for him, and they issued from the house together. On thus emerging forth, the earl coolly and deliberately said to the footman in attendance upon the carriage, " Your mistress is with a paramour at Mrs. Gale's house of fashionable accommodation. Go boldly, knock loudly at the door, and send up word by the servant that the carriage is waiting for her ladyship."

Then, having given this last instruction for the purpose of inflicting another torture upon his wretched wife, the Earl of Curzon hurried away on foot, accompanied by Theodore Varian.

" And now, my lord," said the young man, " what can be done in reference to Emmerson? For your lordship is pledged to me in the most solemn manner to do all you can to ruin that villain. Remember, your lordship owes me a debt of gratitude, for through me did you obtain possession of those five thousand guineas."

"I have not forgotten the obligation I owe you," said the earl, " and I shall cheerfully, indeed, most gladly, bring an action for crim. con. against Emmerson as well as against Lord Sackville. Do you not remember that some months ago you assured me that in Emmerson's writing-desk, to which you said you possessed a skeleton key, you discovered a letter from the countess? "

" Yes, my lord, I remember it well," replied Varian. " It is not likely that I should have forgotten it. It contains damning proofs of her ladyship's guilt."

" But you said at the time," remarked the earl, " that you could not procure it, for fear of exciting Emmerson's suspicions."

" Oh, but that reason exists no longer, my lord," exclaimed Varian, in a tone of savage exultation. " I care not now how soon I leave that vile, bad man again. During the past four or five months I have been able to do enough to lay the foundation of a vengeance so striking, so terrible — But no matter," he observed, suddenly checking himself, " your lordship requires that letter of which we have been speaking, and to-morrow or next day you shall have it without fail."

The earl and Theodore then separated, the former to

return to his mansion in Grosvenor Street, and there gloat over the ruin of Editha; the other to retrace his way to the humble but neat dwelling where he and Ariadne dwelt, and where he retired to rest in fiendish joy at the approaching downfall of Mr. Emmerson.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CAPTAIN ENJOYING HIMSELF

We must now return to Carlton House, where, as the reader will remember, we left the prince locked in a room with Mrs. Malpas, the colonel with Venetia in her boudoir, and Captain Tash lying concealed in the housemaid's chamber.

Having ignominiously expelled therefrom the colonel in his female attire, Captain Tash waited for about a quarter of an hour, when he fancied that Malpas must have got clear out of the palace, and finding that all was now still in the passage, and little suspecting indeed to what desirable quarters Malpas had managed to introduce himself, the captain issued forth from the housemaid's bedchamber. Returning to the dining-room and finding that Sackville had not come back, — remembering, too, that he had intimated he should not return until a very late hour, — the redoubtable Tash resolved upon sitting up for him. But perceiving that the decanters were well-nigh emptied, he rang the bell violently.

"Plumpstead, my worthy fellow," said the captain to the butler, who himself answered the summons under the impression that more wine was wanted, "you behold me alone, without liquor and without a companion. Now, forasmuch as you are an excellent fellow and have the keeping of an excellent cellar, you shall forthwith bring up half a dozen bottles of the raciest vintage. You can then trot off to bed, as I will sit up for Lord Sackville. But stop one moment. Is my man Robin in your servants' hall?"

"He is, sir," was the reply.

"What is he doing?" asked Tash.

"He has worked himself into the darkest corner of the

place," responded Plumpstead, " and there he sits just for all the world as if he was afraid he was going to be eaten up."

" Ah! you see how modest and diffident he is," exclaimed the captain. " That's the way I've disciplined him. You can tell him I want to speak to him."

The butler departed to execute these commissions, and in a few minutes he returned, bringing half a dozen of wine and followed by Robin.

" Set down the bottles," said Tash, " and I will decant them as I want them." Then, as soon as Plumpstead had withdrawn, he exclaimed, " Now, Robin, sit down and make yourself comfortable. You see how nicely I have managed to get the run of the place, and here I am, the bosom friend of Lord Sackville, the confidant of the prince regent, and smiled upon even by the beautiful Venetia, who does not forget the service we rendered her some time ago. Come, sit down, Robin, I say, and help me knock off this half-dozen of wine, for I mean to wait till Lord Sackville comes back."

Robin accordingly sat down with his master, who began a complete carouse, to which his former potations while sitting with the prince were mere drops of water compared to Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Robin to some little extent threw off his timidity and reserve, and kept his master company. Thus two or three hours passed away, until at length Captain Tash's watch — for he sported one now, and a very handsome one it was, too — informed him that it was close upon three o'clock in the morning. He now ordered Robin to be off home and get to bed, and the Man Friday accordingly took his departure from Carlton House. Captain Tash then opened the last bottle of the six, which he had kept as a special relish for himself, and he was just imbibing the first tumbler — ordinary glasses he affected not — when the door opened and Lord Sackville made his appearance.

" Here I am, my lord, you see," said Tash, in a voice that was somewhat thick and husky, and also interrupted by the hiccoughs, for though the captain was as well-seasoned a human cask as any in London, yet on the present occasion he certainly had imbibed a leetle too much.

" Ah! Tash, are you here still? " said Horace, who looked

pale, care-worn, and agitated, an appearance that was enhanced by the disordered state of his hair and apparel, for, as the reader may very well suppose, he had not tarried to make a very careful toilet at Mrs. Gale's. "Well, I am glad that you are here. Perhaps I shall want your services to-morrow or next day. But have you not been drinking a little?" he demanded, as he now observed the captain's flushed countenance and heavy-looking eyes.

"No, not much," was the response. "About a dozen tumblers of curaçao punch before the prince retired, and just those six bottles subsequently."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Horace, astonished at the quantity. "But no matter, I am glad you remained and felt yourself at home."

"But what ails your lordship?" demanded Tash, who now, in spite of a little opaqueness of vision and obfuscation of ideas, could not help observing that there was something strange in Sackville's looks.

"I will tell you to-morrow," said Horace, fancying that the captain was too drunk to converse upon so delicate a matter at the present moment.

"Nonsense, man!" exclaimed Tash, "tell me all about it now. If anybody has annoyed you, let me know who it is, and I will go and cut his throat from ear to ear; and if you have got into trouble about a woman, egad! we will make Robin marry her, and patch up her reputation."

"Cease this jesting," said Horace, impatiently, "for if you purpose to act as my friend, you must exhibit due prudence and caution."

"Find a more prudent man than I am in all Europe, except perhaps here and there one," said Captain Tash, "and I'll consent to let him eat me up at a mouthful. Now then, propound your grievance. What is it? There's a woman in the case, I feel convinced."

"A lady of high rank and of great beauty," said Horace, "whose name, too, is well known in the fashionable world. This lady has been detected with me by her own husband."

"Daggers and blades!" said Tash, in the husky voice of semi-ebriety, "this is prettily romantic but infernally disagreeable. Who is the lady? For I suppose all London will ring with it to-morrow."

"Yes," responded Horace, "the report will circulate like wildfire. 'Tis the Countess of Curzon."

"By Jupiter! I should not have thought it," exclaimed Tash. "From what I heard, I fancied she was virtue itself."

"Never mind what you heard," said Horace, "here is a positive fact for you. The earl has ere now discovered his wife and me together at Mrs. Gale's."

"And a very respectable place, too," observed Tash. "I once broke a bishop's head there for getting possession of a girl of mine, and knocked a doctor of divinity's eye out on another occasion because he wouldn't stand a second dozen of wine. But what has become of the countess?"

"She has gone to one of her sisters for the rest of this night," answered Horace, "and to-morrow morning she means to leave London."

"But when did this take place?"

"Soon after twelve o'clock," replied Horace. "But the time has slipped away while I have been escorting the unhappy lady to her sister's, and then hurrying off to Lady Lechmere's to ascertain what had happened there and fetch her maid Gertrude — "

"Your lordship seems to be talking as if you thought I knew all about it," interrupted Tash.

"Ah, true!" exclaimed Horace. "But I cannot enter into details now, I am too excited."

"Lie down and go to sleep," said the captain, "and you will wake up quite refreshed and comfortable, ready to eat a good breakfast and then go out and fight a duel with Lord Curzon. For of course you want me to be your second, and of all offices in the world there is none that I fulfil so well as that. By all the daggers and cannons! I will stick to you to the very last; and you shall never leave the ground till you have either killed your adversary or been killed yourself."

"Do not prate in this manner, Tash," said Horace, impatiently. "But pardon my excitement. I am fearfully agitated, — not that I dread the duel, which is doubtless inevitable, but because it will create such a scandal — "

"Scandal, egad!" vociferated the captain, "I wish to heavens that I was about to be the object of such scandal. Why, courted as you are now by all the fashionable world, it is nothing to the way in which you will be sought after,

caressed, and lionized when once this affair is well blown. Upon my soul, you will become the envy of every man about town. When you go into society you will soon see that 'tis much better to have the reputation of a good crim. con. than to carry about with you the sanctity of a bishop. Ah! what a triumph is in store for you! The moment you enter a ballroom, you will have all the old dowagers tapping you with their fans, and saying, 'Ah! the naughty man!' while they lick their old lips and wish to Heaven that their young and beautiful days had not passed. Then good-looking mammas of between thirty and forty will pretend to be horrified, and holding up their hands, will exclaim, 'Don't come near me, Lord Sackville. It is really quite shocking of you,' and at the same time they will look up with such ardent longing into your face that it will be your own fault if you don't revel in the conquest of all the finest women in London. But the young ladies, the unmarried ones, the misses — ah! that will be quite charming. What wicked looks will be thrown upon you! What sly glances flung sidelong from eyes flashing with the nascent fires that the very idea of your doings will excite in the virginal bosom! In fact, it will be a perfect triumph for your lordship, and it makes me quite sentimental and romantic when I think of it. But, by the bye, what will her ladyship say?" and Captain Tash jerked his finger up to a splendid portrait of Venetia which hung in the apartment.

"Oh, I am not afraid of curtain-lectures," exclaimed Horace, scarcely weighing what he said. "I feel more for Lady Curzon, on whose head such dishonour has fallen."

"Well, my lord, go up to bed, I tell you," said Tash, "and cool your brain with a few hours' sleep. I will lie down on the sofa in this room, so that I shall be ready in the morning to act for you at once should a hostile message come."

Lord Sackville followed the captain's advice and sought his own bedchamber, where, fatigued alike in mind and body, he fell into a profound slumber. The gallant officer, having finished the last bottle and just taken what he called "a thimbleful" (half a tumbler) of brandy to sink it all, rolled himself off his chair upon the sofa, and there speedily became entranced in sleep.

When the captain awoke, it was broad daylight, and

looking at his watch he found it was eight o'clock. Stealing forth from the dining-room, he hastened along the passage and unlocked the door of the chamber in which the prince and Mrs. Malpas had passed the night together. He then retraced his way to the dining-room, rang the bell, and ordered the servant who answered the summons to show him to a chamber where he might perform his ablutions. This was done, and when the captain had shaved, washed himself, and had his clothes brushed, he declared that "he was ready to eat breakfast against any two men living."

A few explanations will now suffice to give the issue of the other adventures which occurred at Carlton House during the memorable night whereof we have been writing.

In the first place, we must state that Mrs. Malpas succeeded in escaping unobserved out of the palace, but not without a previous understanding between herself and his Royal Highness as to some future meeting. The prince gained his own dressing-room, likewise free from unpleasant notice, and by no means dissatisfied with the new conquest which he had achieved.

Let us now peep into Venetia's boudoir. There, at about eight o'clock in the morning, we shall find the lady herself still reclining in the couch where she had been compelled to abandon her charms to a man whom she detested. The colonel was up and dressed, — that is to say, so far as he could be, his coat and waistcoat having been left in the housemaid's room. But Jessica was summoned, and when the faithful abigail was admitted into the boudoir and found how her mistress had, after all, been triumphed over by the colonel, she could scarcely conceal her indignation. A significant look, however, from her mistress induced her to hold her peace, by reminding her that she, the brilliant Venetia, was completely in the colonel's power, but that the day of vengeance would sooner or later come. As for Malpas himself, he sought not even to conceal his sense of triumph and satisfaction, but this feeling was only expressed in his looks, and not in his words.

To be brief, Jessica procured his coat and waistcoat from the chamber of the housemaid, to whom she proffered some hurried excuse to account for those garments being there

at all, and in all haste did she return with her burden to the boudoir. Thence she conducted the colonel to the private issue from the palace, and as she parted from him, she said, in a low but impressive whisper, "Remember, sir, that great though your triumph has been this night, 'tis not one of which an honourable man may boast."

"Her ladyship," responded Malpas, significantly, "not satisfied with having sealed my lips with her kisses, has undertaken to fasten them still more hermetically with her gold. Indeed, we have a thorough, complete, and amicable understanding together."

Thus speaking, he took his departure, and Jessica, giving vent to her disgust with a haughty toss of the head, hastened back to Venetia's boudoir. There she learned from her ladyship's lips the history of the misadventure which had made the colonel her companion for the past night, instead of the partner of his own wife's couch in the spare bedroom. But though Venetia could explain how the colonel came with her, yet neither she nor the abigail could account for the extraordinary conduct which Mrs. Malpas had adopted in refusing him admission.

Having risen from her couch and performed her toilet, Venetia was about to sally forth to the Marquis of Leveson, in order to obtain from him a further sum of five thousand guineas, wherewith to purchase secrecy of the extortioner Malpas, when she received the following letter enclosing the bank-notes she had entrusted to Mrs. Malpas:

"Nine o'clock, A. M.

"Immediately upon issuing from Carlton House, I enter a shop in Pall Mall for the purpose of penning these few lines to your ladyship, not only that I may at once and without a moment's unnecessary delay enclose the large sum which your ladyship placed in my hand for a special purpose, but also to beseech your ladyship not to charge me with ingratitude for the part that I acted last night. Were I to inform your ladyship that when the instant arrived for me to receive my husband I changed my mind, you would not believe me, because your servant Jessica has no doubt informed you that the key disappeared from the place where you concealed it, and therefore the fact of my being enabled to leave the chamber ere now must of course prove

to you that the key had by some means found its way into the chamber. Your ladyship will hence conclude that something transpired of a totally unexpected nature to interfere with our previous plans and compel me to refuse admittance to my husband when Jessica brought him to the door. Yes, Lady Sackville, something did transpire, but you will pardon me if I pass it over in silence. It is my secret, and must remain so. Doubtless I have forfeited your ladyship's friendship and good opinion. It is my misfortune, scarcely my fault. At all events, I beseech you not to attribute the occurrence to a wilful breach of faith or premeditated treachery on my part. What you will now do relative to my unprincipled husband, I know not, but I have little doubt that you will find means to propitiate if not to disarm him in respect to his infamous designs toward yourself.

"The haste and anxiety I exhibit in penning these lines will, I hope, convince your ladyship that it is my sincerest desire to divest myself as much as possible of the odium which in your ladyship's estimation may attach to my seemingly treacherous conduct of last night, and if I append no name or initials to this note, your ladyship will not imagine that I am afraid to allow such a document with my signature to remain in your hands. It is merely a precaution which I adopt lest the note should fall into the hands of others."

"Ah!" said Venetia, on whose countenance a ray of intelligence had gradually beamed as she perused this singular epistle, "I now begin to understand the whole affair. It is as clear as daylight that some lover, whom Mrs. Malpas preferred to her husband, found his way last night to her chamber. But who could it be? Captain Tash was closeted and concealed in the housemaid's chamber at the very time when you and Malpas gave the ineffectual summons at the spare bedroom door. The lover, then, was doubtless already at that moment in the room with Mrs. Malpas, and Captain Tash had no doubt been pandering to the suddenly improvised amour. Now, was that lover my husband or the prince? For between those two the matter appears most certainly to rest."

"Lord Sackville, please your ladyship," said Jessica,

" went out soon after ten o'clock, and did not return till about three this morning. These facts I learned from his lordship's valet."

" Then the lover of Mrs. Malpas during the past night," said Venetia, " was the prince! " and for a few moments a shade came over her resplendent brow and she bit her scarlet lip with vexation. " But of that no matter," she suddenly exclaimed. " I am not jealous of the prince. I know full well," she continued, the glow of triumph lighting up in her eyes and flushing her cheeks, " that if he now and then wanders away for a short while from the sphere of my influence, with a look or a word can I bring him back to my feet. But I am angry, I am indignant, oh, I am almost disgusted with myself," she cried, in a state of excitement that rendered her grandly and terribly beautiful at the moment, " when I think that, discomfited, vanquished, and defeated, I was compelled to surrender myself to the arms of that dastard Malpas."

" Your ladyship has ten thousand sources of consolation," said Jessica, " for one annoyance of this kind. Brilliant, courted, worshipped as you are, all kinds of happiness are within your reach and at your disposal — "

" Enough, Jessica," cried Venetia, a profound mournfulness suddenly seizing upon her, and as a deep sigh, amounting almost to a convulsive sob, made the rich volume of her bosom upheave as if it were about to burst from the prisonage of the corset, she turned aside for a moment and with a great effort subdued an outburst of grief.

Jessica said nothing, did not even appear to notice this sudden change in her mistress's mood, but bustled about the boudoir as if to arrange three or four things that required putting in order.

" Now, my excellent and faithful Jessica," said Venetia, after a pause of a few minutes, " you must at once take this money to Colonel Malpas and tell him that according to the compact entered into between us ere we parted, he will find another sum of a few thousand pounds at the banker's at Geneva when he arrives there. Here is the address of the hotel in St. James's Street where you will find him."

The abigail took the slip of paper which her mistress handed her, together with the bank-notes for five thousand

pounds, and sallied forth to execute the commission just confided to her.

Another female servant now made her appearance with a tray containing Venetia's breakfast, and scarcely had she retired, when Lord Sackville entered the boudoir.

CHAPTER XV

THE AVOWAL AND THE DEBATE

Though Horace had taken more than usual pains with his morning's toilet, in order to divest himself of an agitated appearance, his looks nevertheless at once showed that something unpleasant had occurred. Venetia instantaneously suspected that he had discovered the circumstance of Malpas having passed the night with her, and that he had come to reproach her. Not that he had any right, after the convenient compact made between him and his wife, to interfere with her little peccadilloes, but still it would have been natural enough for him to feel annoyed and disgusted at any seeming favour which she might have shown to such a wretch as Malpas.

Retaining, however, her self-possession, which indeed she seldom lost in the presence of others, she at once said, "Horace, something has occurred. What is the matter with you?"

"My dearest Venetia," he answered, placing himself by her side upon the sofa, "I have something important to tell you, something that you will doubtless hear from other lips presently, and which therefore you had better in the first instance hear from mine."

"But what is it?" she exclaimed, "something terrible, that it requires so solemn a preface?"

"I do not know whether you will scold me for getting into this scrape," said Horace, affecting a laugh, but it was only a sickly attempt at mirth.

"Ah! then it is some dilemma which you have got yourself into?" she said, now suddenly and completely relieved from any fears on her own account. "But what have you been doing, you naughty Horace?"

" Pardon me, dear Venetia," he replied, " if I first remind you of our compact."

" But you told me of that yesterday, when I gave you the money you required," exclaimed his wife, wondering why he should recur to that subject.

" Yes, but you must forgive me if I now specially allude to it again," continued Horace, " because the dilemma in which I am involved — "

" Come, confess the truth without circumlocution," interrupted Venetia, with an arch look, and at the same time tapping him on the cheek with her fair hand. " You have got into some difficulty with a lady. Is it not so? "

" Yes. But have you heard already? "

" No, I merely judge from your manner. You remind me of the compact, which is that you may have as many mistresses as you fancy, and I may have as many lovers as I like," continued Venetia, the carnation deepening on her countenance.

" Well, you have guessed rightly," said her husband. " But the dilemma is a very serious one. There will be exposure, scandal, law-proceedings, and perhaps — indeed, most likely — "

" Ah! a duel," ejaculated Venetia, now turning very pale. " My dear Horace — But who is the lady? " she suddenly demanded.

" The Countess of Curzon," responded her husband.

" The Countess of Curzon! " echoed Venetia, with a slightly perceptible start, for she could not help being struck, at the moment, by the coincidence that she had been criminal with Editha's husband, and her husband had now been criminal with Editha.

" You are astonished? " observed Sackville. " Doubtless you considered Lady Curzon to be the very pattern of virtue and propriety? "

" Let us not dwell upon details," said Venetia, hurriedly. " Give me an outline of the adventure which has resulted in detection and exposure."

Horace did as he was desired, and his wife listened with the deepest attention.

" And the earl," she said, at the conclusion of his narrative, " has declared that he will have satisfaction? But he

has not sent to you yet? You have heard nothing from him this morning? "

" No. Captain Tash is with me," said Horace. " He will be my second if Curzon should indeed send me a challenge — as, of course, he is sure to do."

" But this challenge," said Venetia, hesitatingly, " are you bound to accept it? "

" Good God! can you ask me such a question? " ejaculated Horace. " Even if I knew beforehand that Curzon's shot would stretch me dead upon the field, I must accept the challenge. Honour demands it; and if I have now come to break all this to your ears, it is simply because I did not wish you to receive the tidings suddenly, or through some channel which might misrepresent the facts."

" Misrepresent them! " exclaimed Venetia, now much agitated. " They cannot possibly be made worse, — I mean, in respect to the danger which menaces you. Now, my dear Horace," she continued, in a tone that was tremulous with the strange and conflicting emotions agitating in her breast, " you know that, notwithstanding the destiny on whose waters I am launched, notwithstanding, indeed, the strange mode of life we lead, you know, I say, that I am fond of you. It was our agreement, some months ago, that all sentimental allusions and maudlin professions of love should cease between us, and, indeed, it would have been a mockery had we not resolved on such a course. Yes, a veritable mockery in the presence of the compact which allows each such unlimited license. But at a moment when your life is threatened, I may be permitted to observe that notwithstanding all that has taken place and all that is taking place, I still experience for you those feelings which will not permit me to hear with indifference of the danger which you are incurring. Indeed, I cannot bear the thought."

" My dear Venetia, you will almost drive me mad," exclaimed Horace, " if you talk thus. You know full well that at the outset I loved you fondly, loved you madly, and in a few short months this affection has not been extirpated from my heart. No; and notwithstanding I have plunged into dissipations, notwithstanding I have been seduced into this intrigue, the secret of which has now so suddenly exploded, yet is there still a niche within my soul where your

image is enshrined. The artificialities with which rank and wealth have surrounded us have not destroyed all natural feelings within me. Besides, you know, Venetia, you can believe me when I declare that I should have been happier had we on the day of our marriage retired to some humble and secluded cottage, rather than have plunged into the brilliancies, the elegancies, and the luxuries of a court life. But having been compelled, as it were, to accept this latter destiny, it was better to yield to the force of the torrent and give way to all pleasure and profligacies, if only for the sake of drowning regretful or remorseful thoughts."

"Ah! my dear Horace," said Venetia, gently passing one of her arms around his neck and drawing him toward her, "this is one of those scenes of tenderness which a husband and wife in our condition ought to avoid, and which nevertheless has its soothing influences, its ecstasies of pleasing pain, its paroxysms of torturing bliss. Yes, dear Horace, though shame be upon either brow, though when inspired by the best feelings of our nature, we dare not look each other in the face, and though now, as your cheek is pillowed against mine, each one burns with the flush of shame, nevertheless we are not indifferent to each other; and to me the thought is harrowing that in a few short hours thine handsome form may become rigid, thine eyes closed in the sleep of death. No, no, this duel must not be!" she added, with passionate vehemence.

"But my honour will be compromised," said Horace. "Candidly speaking, Venetia, I am no coward, I do not shrink from death, and were I compelled to go forth with an army to battle, it would be in the foremost ranks I should be found. But I freely confess that it is hard, yes, it is hard, to stand the chance of being thus cut off in my earliest prime, when rank, honours, and wealth have only just begun to lavish their favours upon me. Besides, Venetia, of the two courses which are open to every man in this life, namely, the good and the bad, I have chosen the latter, and for this sacrifice of all my bettermost feelings, the only compensation can be found in a long life of pleasure and enjoyment. These are the reasons which almost render me a coward when I think of this duel. And then, Curzon, too," he added, "is a matchless shot, so experienced with the pistol that —"

"Oh, your words freeze the blood in my veins," cried

Venetia, shuddering from head to foot. "No, no, my dear Horace, this duel must not take place."

"Ah! vainly do you talk, my poor Venetia," said her husband, "for on the one hand the wretched code of honour will compel Lord Curzon to send me a challenge, and on the other will force me to accept it."

"And this is because he discovered you with his wife?" said Venetia, in a musing tone, as she gazed abstractedly upon her husband, for it seemed as if some thought or scheme was now developing itself in her mind.

"Yes, that is the plain English of the matter," replied Horace.

"Ah! I understand," ejaculated Venetia. Then as her eyes suddenly assumed another and peculiar expression, fraught with a deep and mysterious meaning, she said, "Do you remember, Horace, that on the first occasion you ever required money — it is now some months ago — you said that you consulted me, knowing that I was a woman fertile in expedients?"

"I remember it perfectly," returned her husband, "and I might reiterate the averment now. But what has that to do with the present position of affairs? Believe me, my dear Venetia, there are no means of staving off the present danger. It must be encountered boldly, although, to confess the truth," he added, in a mournful tone, "I experience terrible misgivings amounting to a presentiment as to the result."

"Then I beseech you, Horace, to put faith in my ingenuity," exclaimed Venetia, with the air of one who already has resolved upon some settled plan of action.

"But remember, my dearest wife," said Horace, "that anything you might do in this matter would be to compromise my honour most seriously, because the challenge must be accepted — "

"Now, leave it all to me," interrupted Veentia, with one of her sweetest smiles accompanying a look of confidence and encouragement. "But I am about to give you an instruction which you must obey to the very letter."

"Proceed," said Horace, wondering what possible scheme his wife could so suddenly have devised, but still experiencing sufficient faith in her prudence, tact, and knowledge of the world to feel assured that in whatsoever she might do she

would not compromise his honour in respect to this duel which appeared inevitable.

"Return you to Captain Tash, and remain with him until you receive a message from me," said Venetia. "Then, so soon as Jessica repairs to you with the intimation that I wish to see you, do you come straight hither and enter the boudoir at once, without hesitation, and without the ceremony of knocking at the door."

Horace was about to inquire an explanation relative to this extraordinary instruction, but Venetia good-humouredly cut short all further discourse, and compelled him to quit the room.

A few minutes after her husband had thus left the boudoir, Lady Sackville rang the bell, and when Jessica answered the summons, she said, "You have returned, then, from executing the commission with Colonel Malpas?"

"Yes, your ladyship," was the abigail's reply. "I saw the colonel, gave him the money, and delivered your message. He says that he shall set off at once, and as the northwestern part of the Continent is now so unsettled in consequence of French affairs, he shall not attempt to pass along the Rhine, but shall take ship for the Mediterranean and by those means reach Geneva."

"Good!" said Venetia, in a tone of approval. "And now, my dear girl, you must at once proceed to Grosvenor Street and see the Earl of Curzon. If he be not at home, wait for his return, and when you see him, tell him that if he values my good opinion and friendship he will at once pay me a visit."

"But has not your ladyship heard," said Jessica, stammering and hesitating, "of a certain circumstance? The whole town is ringing with it already. I heard the waiters talking of it at the door of the hotel where Colonel Malpas is staying. I also heard of it again at a shop where I stopped to buy something I required — But now your ladyship is prepared to hear it — "

"I know everything already," said Venetia, "so don't tarry to converse with me, but start off at once and deliver my message to Lord Curzon. Tell him that I have heard of what has taken place, and that therefore I am well aware he cannot openly visit Lord Sackville's suite of apartments at Carlton House. Tell him, therefore, that he is to accom-

pany you hither, and you will introduce him by the private door, — as it is absolutely necessary I should see him without delay."

Jessica accordingly sped upon this errand, and on arriving in Grosvenor Street, she found that Lord Curzon was at home, but engaged with his solicitor on urgent business. On hearing, however, that it was Jessica who wished to say a few words to him, he immediately granted her an audience in another room, and on receiving the message which she delivered, he appeared to be uncertain how to act. The abigail urged upon him the necessity of complying with her mistress's desire, and he gave his consent, for he not only was loath to quarrel with Venetia, but he was also anxious to hear what she might have to say, a presentiment informing him that it was relative to the transactions of the preceding night, though how Venetia purposed to interfere in them, he was at a loss to understand. However, to be brief, he dismissed his solicitor for a couple of hours, and bidding Jessica hasten homeward, he soon afterward sallied forth and rejoined her in the neighbourhood of Carlton House.

The cunning abigail speedily introduced him into the palace, and led him unobserved to Venetia's boudoir, where he was welcomed in the most charming and flattering manner by the divinity of the place.

Having bade him sit down upon the sofa, Venetia told Jessica to withdraw, but as the faithful abigail was retiring, she whispered in her ear the following rapidly uttered instruction: "Listen attentively for the boudoir bell, and when you hear it ring, go and tell Lord Sackville that I wish to speak to him immediately."

CHAPTER XVI

THE WIFE'S STRATAGEM

We must now observe that during the interval of Jessica's absence to fetch the Earl of Curzon, Venetia had thrown off her gown and put on a loose morning wrapper, thus leaving herself in an elegant undress. She likewise allowed her hair to flow in all its auburn richness and silken luxuriance over the shoulders, which were now left bare in their dazzling whiteness, while a few stray tresses were suffered to fall around her throat and over her bosom, where they lay like dark gold upon polished ivory. Into her looks she had thrown all that sensuous wanton languor which rendered her so dangerously enchanting and so overpoweringly captivating in the presence of a man endowed with strong passions.

Nor was the effect of all this preparation on her part and of the luxurious exposure of her rich and resplendent charms lost upon the Earl of Curzon, notwithstanding his mind had been so much occupied with other things. Moreover, although he had once revelled in those beauties on which his eyes now settled eagerly and intently, yet it was but once, and that was far, very far, from being sufficient to sate the strong passion with which Venetia had inspired him from the very first moment of their acquaintance.

The reader is of course aware that after a certain communication which Venetia had received from Colonel Malpas, she could not in her heart entertain anything like a favourable sentiment toward the Earl of Curzon. When with the colonel on the Continent he had evidently talked of his amour with herself; perhaps, for anything Venetia knew to the contrary, he had even boasted elsewhere and to others of the conquest he had obtained over her. At all

events, he had betrayed the delicate circumstance to Malpas, and this was a crime which Lady Sackville was not likely to forgive. If, then, we find Venetia now affecting the amiable toward Curzon, smiling upon him, placing herself upon the sofa by his side, and at once bending upon him a look and assuming an attitude which seemed to declare that she was not unmindful of their past intimacy, if we behold her doing all this, it was because she had a special purpose in view and a particular object to accomplish, to the carrying out of which she made all her feelings of dislike toward the earl entirely subordinate.

"I thought, Charles," she said, "that the very first person you would have seen, on returning to London, was myself," and as she thus spoke she threw into her looks an expression of tender reproach.

"My dearest Venetia," he said, "I should have communicated with you this afternoon. Most assuredly I should not have ventured to call upon you after the transactions which occurred last night, and in which I am so painfully and seriously involved with your husband."

"Come, tell me all about it," said Venetia, throwing one of her snowy arms around his neck, and leaning toward him in such a way that her bosom reposed upon his breast and she could thus gaze up into his countenance; "tell me, I say, all the particulars of this adventure, for you and I, Charles, at all events, are not going to quarrel."

"You know not how unspeakably happy you render me by this assurance, dearest Venetia," exclaimed Curzon, bestowing deeply sensuous caresses upon the wife of that man whom he was about to challenge to a mortal duel for having intrigued with his wife. "You look handsomer than ever, Venetia. You are indeed grandly beautiful," he continued, and his fingers played with the shining tresses of her luxuriant hair.

"Well, you shall compliment me presently," she said, with a smile displaying the two rows of pearl which, gleaming in contrast with the moist scarlet of her lips, seemed the ivory portals through which the balmy breath of heaven itself came forth. "Tell me again, I ask you, the details of this adventure of last night."

"You must know, my dear Venetia," responded the earl, "that for some time past — seven or eight months, perhaps

— I have suspected, or, rather," he continued, "I have had positive proofs that my wife was a thorough intriguante."

"And pray, are you the most immaculate of men?" inquired Venetia, with an arch smile.

"No, far from it," responded Curzon, snatching a kiss from her lips; but he immediately added, "I do not choose my wife to pursue a similar game."

"Then how you must despise, scorn, and loathe me," said Venetia, but with a certain haughty mockery in her tone. "Am not I a wife, and yet have I not forgotten myself with you? Am I not likely to do it again?"

"Ah! but you are one of the world's exceptions," exclaimed Curzon, not knowing exactly what response to give. Then, after some little hesitation and with a certain confusion in his looks, he said, "But wherefore shall we continue this topic? It only makes me say things disagreeable to you, and I would not for the world offend or annoy you, Venetia."

"You neither offend nor annoy me," she observed, with a peculiarity of tone and look which for the moment seemed to have something sinister in it; but as her countenance suddenly lighted up, she exclaimed, in a blithe voice, "I know very well that I am different from other women, and there lives not a man on the face of the earth who can either scorn or despise me."

"True, most true," exclaimed Curzon, bestowing upon her another caress. "Well, I was about to explain that on the Continent I met a person who revealed to me all the secrets relative to Editha's misconduct, and how artfully she managed, by the aid of her principal tirewoman, a girl named Gertrude, to carry on her intrigues in such a way that none of the servants, save this confidential one, could possibly suspect what was going on."

"And who could have been base and mischievous enough to give you such information?" asked Venetia, her suspicions instantaneously settling upon Colonel Malpas.

"Ah! my charmer, I must not tell you that," said Curzon, patting her face.

"Well, go on," she said, with an arch smile. "I do not wish to penetrate more deeply than you choose into your secrets. I suppose, however, that, having gained this information on the Continent, you lost no time in turning it to account the moment you came back to London?"

"Such was indeed the case," rejoined the earl, "and it was in order that I might carry out my project at once that I did not instantaneously present myself at Carlton House on my return. In fact, I only arrived yesterday evening, at about seven o'clock, and going, in the first instance, to see a friend of mine, or, rather, a young man who is interested in my affairs, I sent him to Grosvenor Street with a letter saying that I should not be at home until this evening. Ah! my dear Venetia, pardon me if I say I know your sex so well that I felt assured my wife would at once communicate with her paramour, even supposing that she had not an appointment with him for the night."

"Oh, what a calculation on your part!" exclaimed Venetia, in a tone of mock rebuke. "What an opinion you must indeed have of our sex! But pray go on. I am interested in these proceedings which you are relating."

"Well," continued the earl, "at about eleven I went home. If I had found Editha, I should of course have told her that I had been enabled, after all, to return more speedily than I at first anticipated; but she was not at home, and I understood that she had gone to Lady Lechmere's. Ah! then I knew at once that I was on the right track. I accordingly proceeded thither. But public rumour has doubtless told you all the rest that occurred?"

"Yes," replied Venetia. "And now, do you not think that you have been very foolish? How can you possibly find fault with your wife?"

"Ah! my dear Venetia," exclaimed the earl, "if you force me into explanations, I must give them. My disposition is a curious one, and rakish, profligate, dissipated though I may be, I could not endure the thought that my wife should follow in the same path. It may be unjust, it may be preposterous —"

"Well, we will not comment any more upon this part of the affair," interrupted Venetia. "But tell me, are you going to challenge Horace to a duel?"

"I must," answered the Earl of Curzon. "But I promise you, my dear Venetia, that I will fire very wide of the mark. Not that I suppose you care overmuch for your husband —"

"You talk of purposely missing your aim," said Venetia, hastily, "but by that very attempt you may hit him, for

is it not sometimes the random or ill-directed shot that takes the fatal effect? "

"And yet I must challenge him," reiterated the earl. "You know very well, my dear Venetia, how peremptory is the code of honour."

"Honour!" echoed Venetia, and her beautiful lips writhed in superb disdain. "Now tell me, is not this thing that you call honour the most wretched, paltry, miserable scarecrow of a sentiment that ever was? Horace is as justified in intriguing with your wife as you are in intriguing with his, if if there be any justification at all. And yet because you happen to have found him and your wife out, you must fight a duel."

"To be sure," exclaimed Curzon. "Suppose that he had found you and me out, should I not be compelled to go and fight a duel with him? "

"Ah! it is a wretched affair, this code of honour of yours, after all," said Venetia. Then, as she started somewhat abruptly from the sofa, she said, "I think that I have a book here which exposes the folly of duelling."

Thus speaking, she advanced toward a side table which stood in a recess of the chimneypiece, and while pretending to be in search of a book, she pulled the bell-wire, unperceived by Lord Curzon.

"No, I cannot find the volume," she said, and returning to the sofa, she placed herself in the same voluptuous contact with him as before. "Now, do you not think you are acting foolishly? Tell me the truth," and she began to lavish upon him a perfect torrent of caresses, which seemed of the tenderest as they were certainly of the most exciting nature.

She fastened her lips to his, she threw her arms around his neck, and during the intervals of the warm and fervid kisses which they thus exchanged, she breathed the tenderest expressions in his ears. Intoxicated with a sense of bliss, the Earl of Curzon forgot all about Editha, all about his contemplated lawsuit. He thought only of this woman of glorious beauty and of enchanting fascinations who was now placed in such close contact with him, and yielding to the influence, the almost maddening influence, of his desires, he was on the point of snatching the last crowning bliss, when the door of the boudoir was suddenly burst open and Lord Sackville appeared upon the threshold.

The Earl of Curzon gave vent to an ejaculation of dismay while starting from Venetia's arms as if she had suddenly changed into a serpent. Then, as he beheld the scarlet glow which flamed up on the countenance of her husband, he naturally thought that it was a fiery indignation which was thus expressed. But though perhaps for the first instant there might have been such a feeling in Sackville's heart, yet it was rather with amazement that he was thus inspired, — amazement mingled with a feeling of shame, too, at the spectacle that now met his eyes. But almost instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, and of course penetrating the stratagem which Venetia had thus adopted, he closed the door, locked it, and advanced a few paces farther into the boudoir.

Curzon knew not what to say or what to do. He was overwhelmed with confusion, until Venetia suddenly bursting out laughing recalled him to a full sense of his position. Yes, and all in a moment the truth flashed to his mind. It was a stratagem on the part of Lady Sackville to place him and her husband precisely on the same footing toward each other. But, heavens! what an utter profligate did Venetia now seem in his eyes! What a shameless meretricious woman had she thus rendered herself! Such were the thoughts that flashed through the mind of the Earl of Curzon all in a moment.

"I congratulate your lordship," he said, a withering irony in his accents, "upon the possession of such an amiable and excellent wife, who thus readily sacrifices herself in order to save you from a duel to which I now of course cannot challenge you."

"At all events, my lord," retorted Horace, his countenance again becoming scarlet, "since I know myself to be profligate and debauched, I am not base enough to go laying snares to entrap my wife, nor unjust enough to reproach her when I find that she goes astray."

"Well," said Curzon, contemptuously, "I do not think we need stand here bandying words. 'Tis quite apparent now that I cannot challenge you to meet me at a dozen paces, nor can you challenge me. Neither can I very well bring an action against you, nor you against me."

"It would indeed be the most ridiculous pair of lawsuits," observed Horace, "that ever were brought before the

cognizance of a tribunal. But how is the complicated affair to end? "

"Perhaps this fair divinity, the goddess of intrigue as well as of beauty," said Curzon, with a bow of mock solemnity toward Venetia, "will condescend to issue her instructions; for it is quite clear that her ladyship's dramatic imagination has contrived this splendid equivoque. Heavens! if it should be lost to the theatrical world, what a misfortune would it be!" added the earl, in a tone of bitter irony.

Venetia, who had been listening with calm indifference to the observations thus made by the Earl of Curzon, now deemed it time to develop her views.

"You both stand in a strange position toward each other, it is true," she said, "and you neither appear to understand how there can possibly be an issue from the dilemma. Now, as all the world is already acquainted with the discovery of your intrigue, Horace, with Lady Curzon, it becomes absolutely necessary that you should fight a duel with Lord Curzon. The code of honour, as he has assured me, requires this pleasant little proceeding, or else he would be deemed and proclaimed a coward by all his friends as well as his enemies. A duel, then, there must be. But, on the other hand, how can Lord Curzon possibly seek your life, Horace, for having dishonoured him, when he in the same manner has dishonoured you? And it will not do to tell the world that there is tit for tat in this affair. In the first place, it would not suit the earl even to have the fact made known at all, because he wishes to obtain a divorce from his wife, which he could not procure if his own conduct were made public. He would be held undeserving of the remedy. Then, in the second place, there is no need to make public the scene which has now occurred, because you, Horace, do not wish to expose your wife, you do not seek a divorce from her, you have no vindictive feelings to gratify. As for the Earl of Curzon, he, of course, as a man and as a gentleman, will maintain a profound silence also relative to the scene that has just occurred. Now, therefore, you begin to comprehend how stands the matter between you, and yet it is most contradictory, most anomalous, most paradoxical. For the world, knowing only of your intrigue, Horace, with Lady Curzon, will, according to the code of honour, look for a duel between yourself and Lord Curzon; whereas you,

Lord Curzon," she continued, " on the other hand, cannot possibly stand up to take my husband's life under the circumstances which have now transpired, but which are not to be made known to the world. Such is the contradictory position. But know ye what is to be done? "

Venetia stopped short as she asked this question. Both her husband and the Earl of Curzon gazed upon her in unfeigned surprise mingled with curiosity. The latter even forgot his rage and hate at the stratagem of which he had been made the dupe, so completely was his interest now enchained in the part which this extraordinary woman, as extraordinary as she was beautiful, was taking in these delicate and difficult matters.

" Well, neither of you seems to be able to answer my question," she continued, after a pause of nearly a minute. " I will tell you, then, what is to be done. There must be a sham duel. Yes, a duel in which there shall be every appearance of hostile intent, in which the pistols shall be loaded with powder and ball, duly discharged, pointblank, as I believe the phrase is, and even fired a second time, if you will, but leaving you both unscathed and unhurt, after all."

" If such a proceeding can really take place," said the Earl of Curzon, still under the influence of astonishment, " it will assuredly be the best manner to settle the present difficulty. A due homage will thereby be paid to the opinion of the world, the laws of honour will be openly satisfied, and privately no unfairness will have been committed between your lordship and me."

" I am perfectly agreeable," said Horace, " for of course, under present circumstances, I cannot wish to let you have the chance of taking my life, and I assuredly am equally repugnant to take yours."

" But respecting the action for crim. con.," said the Earl of Curzon, " which must precede the suit for a divorce in the House of Lords? I have already consulted my solicitor upon the subject."

" Ah! your lordship has not suffered the grass to grow under your feet since your return to London," exclaimed Venetia. " But since you appeal to me relative to this new question, is there not such a thing as seeking only nominal damages? — in which case Horace will, of course, offer no opposition to the action."

" Yes, the legal portion of the affair can be thus managed," said the Earl of Curzon. " But your ladyship has yet to tell us how this sham duel, as you call it, is to be managed."

" I chanced a few days ago," said Venetia, " to take up a book in which were recorded many curious experiments of legerdemain, sleight-of-hand, and conjuring tricks, and one of the feats described was most ingenious and interesting. It was that of a conjurer suffering a person to fire a loaded pistol at him, a pistol charged with ball."

" But what was the ball made of? " asked Curzon, with an incredulous curl of the lip.

" It was a ball of hollow glass filled with quicksilver," answered Venetia, " and when such a bullet is held in the hand it feels of the same weight as a genuine one, the appearance of which it also has to the eye."

" Excellent! " exclaimed both Horace and Curzon, now in the same breath, for they both perceived in an instant how Venetia's idea of a sham duel could be carried out.

" Now, Horace, you can withdraw," said his wife, " and I will summon Jessica to conduct the Earl of Curzon as privately as possible out of the palace."

" In the course of the day, then," said Horace, with a cold salutation, " your lordship will send some friend with a challenge, according to the wonted formalities? "

" I shall do so, my lord," responded Curzon, likewise with a haughty reserve.

Venetia now rang the bell, and her husband at once issued from the boudoir.

" Now, my dear Curzon," said Venetia, the moment they were once more alone together, " you must not be angry at what I have done, for I was resolved to put an end to this duel, or, rather, to disarm it of its dangerous character. Come, tell me you are not angry, for assuredly I do not wish to quarrel with you," and as she spoke she lavished upon him such intoxicating caresses that he rapidly experienced a thaw in the ill-humour which he had conceived against her. " I forgive you for the harsh and biting words you used just now toward me," she added, " and therefore — "

" Well, dearest Venetia," said Curzon, " you must admit that the stratagem of which you made me the dupe was enough to irritate me."

" Hush! no more of all this," she said, gaily and archly

placing her hand upon his mouth. "Now sit down once more, and tell me all that occurred at Geneva."

At this moment a knock was heard at the door, and Venetia ordered Jessica, from whom the summons came, to return in half an hour, for she had only rung the bell in the presence of her husband to make him believe that Curzon was at once to take his departure, and that she had no private business with him.

The earl accordingly proceeded to give Venetia an account of just as much as it suited him to relate concerning his proceedings at Geneva. He did not mention the name of Malpas, and she did not choose to mention it either. In fact, her only object was now to ascertain the precise position in which affairs seemed to be in the household of the Princess of Wales, and if she showed herself thus affable, condescending, and kind toward the Earl of Curzon, it was merely because she deemed it prudent to conciliate a man who was acquainted with so many of her secrets.

At the expiration of the half-hour Jessica returned to the boudoir, and Curzon was then stealthily conducted from the palace.

Venetia now remained alone, alone to ponder upon all that had taken place, and to plunge into those meditations which the development of her career, with all its varied incidents, was so well calculated to engender. Was not all sense of virtue now lost within her soul? Had she not become shameless in her depravities and brazen in her profligacies? Yes; nor did she attempt to conceal this fact from herself. On the contrary, she was resolved that so far as the power of her beauty and the witchery of her fascinations could serve her purposes of ambition or of intrigue, of amorous gallantry or of subtle design, she would never hesitate to render those means available.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GATHERING STORM

At about the same hour that the scene which we have just related was taking place at Carlton House, another of a very different character, but of equal interest in the development of our tale, was occurring in the City.

Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker, was seated in his private office, examining the letters which had arrived by the morning's post. His countenance was haggard and careworn; there was an occasional quivering of the lip which denoted an inward excitement of no ordinary degree, and as he opened letter after letter, his hands trembled with nervous agitation. Ever and anon he gave a kind of convulsive start, as if suddenly becoming aware of the moral weakness to which he was thus yielding and the physical derangement that was accompanying it, and then he would compress his lips and clench his fists violently, and even stamp his foot upon the carpet, as he said to himself, "This is ridiculous! this is childish! Things cannot be so bad as my fears portray them."

But things were bad, though, and very bad, too, with Mr. Emmerson the bill-broker. Several unfortunate speculations had within the last few months crippled his resources, and the enormous drains which his amour with Lady Curzon made upon his purse tended still further to hamper him. Concurrently with these progressive sources of ruin, the extravagances of his family had increased at Clapham, and in the endeavour to outshine all their neighbours, his wife and daughter had set no bounds to their profusion. But, as Emmerson day by day had seen his own affairs becoming more involved and his family's expenditure growing more lavish, a feeling of pride mingled with alarm had prevented

him from communicating to his wife the state of his finances and the necessity that existed for economy. Yes, pride, because he could not bring himself to give utterance to the humiliating words which should enforce the necessity of retrenchment, and alarm, because he felt that if he were to show any outward sign of his embarrassments, all his creditors would become clamorous at once, his credit would be stopped, and his destruction accelerated. Thus, the extravagances at home had gone on increasing while his means of supporting them were diminishing, and although his wife and daughter observed at times that he became thoughtful and sombre, and though they even detected an expression of perfect agony occasionally sweeping over his countenance, yet they quieted their own fears with the thought that too close an application to business was the cause of Emmerson's altering looks, and not for a moment did they choose to suspect that any trouble was being introduced into his finances.

In addition to the above-mentioned causes of pecuniary embarrassment, Emmerson had recently stood an expensive contest for the aldermanic gown of one of the City wards. Here again did the pride of a man who was so strong in oppressing all whom his usurious practices brought within his scope become his weakness, and though at the very first moment, when a deputation of his friends waited upon him and asked him to stand as a candidate, he was frightened at the enormous expense into which it would lead him, he nevertheless had not the courage to breathe the word " no." The canvass therefore took place, and judging by the promises received, Emmerson's success appeared certain. But when the day of election came, many of those who had pledged themselves to support him, stopped away, while others actually went to the polling place and recorded their votes against him. Vain had been all his expenditure to ensure his election, equally vain and futile had proved his frothy vapourings relative to " our blessed Constitution " and " glorious laws." It was evident that some mysterious agency had been at work to undermine him, and that to such dark and insidious manœuvrings was his defeat to be attributed.

While still smarting under the galling sense of a failure which, prominent as he had made himself as a common

councilman, was absolutely ignominious, Emmerson began to observe that some of his most influential City friends seemed less cordial than they were wont to be. At first he thought that this was mere fancy on his part, but he soon received such signal proofs to the contrary that he was compelled to confess to himself that his character was waning and his credit diminishing. Fresh evidences of these facts promptly developed themselves. His bankers wrote a peremptory letter to remind him that he had latterly been overdrawing his account and paying but little money in; two or three capitalists, of whom he had for years past been enabled to obtain any sums he required, were full of excuses when he now demanded their aid. One had " locked up all his funds," another had " decided upon turning his floating capital into other channels," and a third " could not possibly oblige Mr. Emmerson on the present occasion." But this was not all. Some of his best clients — well-to-do tradesmen who occasionally wanted the accommodation of a few thousands or hundreds, and who did not mind paying handsomely for the loan thereof for a short time — found out some other bill-broker who charged a lesser interest, and thus Emmerson's business was rapidly falling off.

Still these were not all the evils and misfortunes that were closing in around him. During the last week or two, reports had been privately whispered both in the City and at Clapham that his affairs were embarrassed beyond all remedy. Bills then came pouring in upon him, and he found, to his horror and dismay, that large accounts for upholstery, jewelry, wine, millinery, and so forth, for which he had given his wife the money, remained unliquidated, she having lavished the funds in other ways. That his approaching downfall was rumoured, soon reached his ears by several disagreeable means. His wife had a quarrel with a female servant whom she threatened to discharge, whereupon the woman blazed forth in a fury of invective and taunt, declaring that pride would have a fall, and that everybody knew the end of all this pomp and ostentation was at hand. Then Mrs. Emmerson's eyes were suddenly opened to the truth, and she charged her husband with his financial embarrassment, as if it constituted a positive crime of which he had been guilty toward her. As a matter of course, he turned upon her with virulent reproaches for her extrava-

gance, and thus a terrible scene took place, of which all the servants were listeners. On going into the City on that occasion, Emmerson found that all persons who had any claims upon him there were getting very pressing for payment, and in the course of a few days they grew absolutely clamorous, acting and speaking as if they were secretly urged on by somebody who was giving them to understand that unless they became thus importunate it was very likely they would never be paid at all.

Such was now the position of Emmerson's affairs; and the reader will not therefore be surprised at finding him in such a nervous, excited, and agitated state as we have described at the opening of the present chapter. Indeed, it was quite clear that matters were coming to a crisis, and although for a few moments he had hugged the belief that "things were not so bad as they seemed," the letters which he was now opening speedily convinced him that things could not possibly be worse. Some of these letters insisted upon prompt settlement of accounts already delivered; others were from solicitors giving notice of actions in cases where many fruitless applications for payment had been made; other letters, again, contained refusals, some speciously apologetic, others laconically blunt, in answer to requests made by Emmerson for loans from former City friends; and other letters conveyed the intimation of the failure of speculations in which he had embarked, and the inability of three or four large debtors to pay him what they owed.

These circumstances were of themselves sufficient to drive even a stronger-minded man than Emmerson to utter desperation. But still they did not constitute the whole sum of the crushing calamities and goading adversities that were hemming him in around. There was yet one other circumstance that cut him to the very soul, for the rumour of what was termed "the *faux pas* in high life," relative to the Countess of Curzon and Lord Sackville, had already reached the City, and thus made Emmerson aware that he had been duped and deluded by a fashionable courtesan who had wheedled large sums out of him under the semblance of affection, while she was all the time intriguing with her patrician paramour.

Bitterly, bitterly did Emmerson curse his folly, now that the infatuation had passed away; deeply, deeply did he

deplore his miserable stupidity in yielding himself up so completely to the Circean wiles and siren blandishments of that titled profligate who had thus taken so large a share in accomplishing his ruin.

Half-maddened, then, was Emmerson as he sat at noon in his own private office, looking over his letters and obtaining a deeper insight into his perplexities as he advanced step by step down the precipice which that correspondence thus developed to his views. And while all these fearful things were forced upon his contemplation, through the whole cloud of miseries penetrated the thought of his astounding folly in respect to Lady Curzon. And how humiliated, how profoundly humiliated, did he now feel when he reflected that the haughty peeress, so far from ever loving him, the plebeian money-grubber, had been making a tool and an instrument of him the whole time; and that if she had encouraged him to quit the dingy regions of the City in order to enter the paradise of West End fashion, the portals of which had unfolded their wings at her magic touch to give him admission, it was only because the enchantress had her own selfish purposes to serve. For he felt, full keenly felt, that those golden gates of high life's Elysium would now be as sternly and mercilessly closed against him as the doors of a workhouse are to a pauper who has no settlement in the parish; and he almost gnashed his teeth with rage as he reflected that, although he had paid thousands of pounds for the privilege of basking in the sunlight of patrician beauty and mingling with the other gilded insects that flitted about in the roseate floods of luxury, yet that he was only a plebeian intruder and vulgar interloper, after all.

Such was Emmerson's state of mind on the day of which we are now writing. Having gone through all his correspondence, as a man traverses a district where nature presents nought save features of horror, gloom, and danger, unrelieved by a single spot of refreshing verdure or floral colouring, he started from his seat and began pacing the room with rapid but uneven steps.

What was he to do? Should he become bankrupt, pass through the ordeal of that tribunal so humbling to commercial pride, so ruinous to the credit of the money-grubber, and then seek to begin the world anew? Or should he gather together such wrecks of his late immense resources as he

could possibly accumulate, and fly to Canada, or some part of the world where, under another name, he might enter upon a fresh career? This latter idea was the one that pleased him best. He was so disgusted with the extravagances of his wife and daughter, forgetting that he himself had first encouraged them in a lavish expenditure, and then had not courage to check it when it exceeded all reasonable bounds, that he resolved to leave them behind him to shift for themselves. Heartless, selfish, and cruel was this man, even at the very moment when it was most natural that he should seek the solace and the sympathy of those whom he thus coldly and deliberately determined on abandoning for ever.

As a matter of course, Emmerson was too cautious to confide to any one his intention of departing from the country. But still he could not make all the necessary preparations himself. There were certain little sums of money owing to him in different quarters, and most of which might be obtained upon application, but he could not go around collecting them himself, and indeed it was absolutely necessary that this duty should be performed by Varian.

"But will he suspect anything?" asked Emmerson of himself, suddenly stopping short in the midst of his agitated walk as the necessity of employing Theodore in the business thus struck him. "No, I do not think that he will suspect. Ever since he returned to me, he has been docile, meek, and obliging, he has done everything he could to regain my confidence, and it is clear, from a few words which he has occasionally let drop, that he himself does not imagine my affairs to be very seriously embarrassed. I do believe he is a good, kind-hearted, faithful creature, after all, and that I treated him cruelly and harshly when some months ago I sent him to Newgate. Well, then, it is not likely he will suspect anything, and if he do, he would not betray me. No, I might almost make him a confidant of my intentions, and yet it were better that I should not trust him further than is necessary. But, at all events, I will now speak to him and watch his countenance narrowly."

Having thus mused, Mr. Emmerson composed his features as well as he was able, took a glass of wine from one of the sample bottles which he invariably kept in his office, and

then summoned Theodore Varian to his presence. The young man entered with an air so perfectly frank and open, and at the same time so respectful, that the bill-broker perceived therein the corroboration of all the reflections he had just been making with regard to him, and reseating himself at the table, he said, "Shut the door, Varian. I wish to speak to you for a few minutes."

Theodore did as he was desired, and as he approached the table, he said, "Two or three persons came inquiring for you just now, sir, but as I knew you were occupied with your letters, I said you were not in at the moment."

"Ah!" ejaculated Emmerson, "then I suppose you knew they were persons whom I did not wish to see?" and he fixed his eyes steadfastly upon Theodore's countenance.

"I did certainly entertain that impression, sir," replied Theodore, totally unabashed and unmoved, indeed, not appearing to observe that his master's eyes were settled upon him, "because the persons came for payment of their accounts. But as I know that your resources are all locked up for the moment in your numerous speculations, I took it upon myself to give the answer which I have mentioned."

"And you have not only done well, but also reasoned correctly," said Emmerson, with an approving smile. "In fact, Theodore, you have been long enough in my office and are well enough acquainted with the commercial world, to know that there are times and seasons when even the richest and the most prosperous merchants, traders, and speculators are temporarily embarrassed. Such is the case with me at the present moment. I have thousands locked up in ventures which are really no ventures at all, because they are safe as the Bank of England itself; and, moreover, certain remittances which I have been expecting from the Colonies have not yet arrived. The consequence is, that I am somewhat hampered for the present."

"All this is precisely what I knew, sir," remarked Varian, with every appearance of the most genuine sincerity, "for I felt convinced that a gentleman of your intelligence and business habits could not be involved in serious difficulties."

"Of course not! The idea would be ridiculous indeed!" exclaimed Emmerson, laughing, but it was a hollow and unnatural laugh, the laugh of desperation. "But I tell you what we had better do, Mr. Varian," he almost immediately

continued. " You shall go around collecting the small sums that are due, and I will get in the large amounts. I think in the course of the day we may manage to do this, and then we shall be able to make up our books so as to see correctly how matters stand and settle the liabilities that are most pressing. And then," added Emmerson, assuming an air of proud assurance, which Heaven knows he did not feel in his heart, " I shall get a loan of twenty or thirty thousand from my bankers to answer my purposes until other moneys begin to flow in again."

" If you will give me a list, sir, of the persons who owe small sums, I will go around at once," said Varian.

" Here is a list which I have already made out," said Emmerson, and he handed his clerk a piece of paper.

Theodore then sallied forth, inwardly chuckling at the thought that the hour of his vengeance was approaching, for he had not the slightest difficulty in penetrating the design of his master. On the contrary, he saw plainly enough that Emmerson was endeavouring to " make up a purse " wherewith to flee from the country, and he resolved to apply the spark to the train of combustibles that were now ready to explode around him.

Mr. Emmerson also sallied forth, but it was not, as he had alleged, to collect any large sums. He wished to Heaven that there were any such sums which he was able to collect at all. But he went forth to keep up appearances with Varian, and likewise to avoid the duns who were calling every quarter of an hour at his office. In his desperation, however, he resolved as a last resource to call upon two or three wealthy friends with whom he had been accustomed to have large transactions, but whom he now found inaccessible to his demands and his representations. Vainly did he assure them that " there was a most excellent opportunity of investing a few thousands at twenty per cent., if they liked to go shares with him in the enterprise and advance a part of the capital." They refused him in a manner which as plainly as possible told him that they would not entrust their funds in his hands, and though he endeavoured to ride the high horse, he nevertheless went forth from their counting-houses crestfallen and downcast.

He returned to his office at about four o'clock, and found that Varian had already come back. Yes, the young man

had been there alone for the last half-hour, having sent the boy out upon some pretence, and during this half-hour he had procured from Emmerson's desk the document which he had promised to deliver into the hands of the Earl of Curzon. But at the moment when Emmerson returned, Theodore was seated at his usual place in the front office, attending to his business with a placid and calm demeanour, as if nothing unusual had happened and nothing of an exciting character was going on.

"Well, what luck?" inquired Emmerson, affecting an air of indifference, though all his plans depended upon Varian's answer.

"I have succeeded, sir, in every quarter," replied Theodore, "and have collected the several items upon this list. Here are three hundred and seventy pounds in all."

"Good!" exclaimed Emmerson, scarcely able to conceal his joy; and he felt at the moment that even in the midst of the most desperate circumstances there may be yet a gleam of hope and a source of cheerfulness.

Having counted the money, he placed it in his pocket, observing, with an apparent offhand manner, "that he himself had been very lucky and had collected a few thousands." He then entered his inner office, sat down, and began to reflect profoundly upon an idea which within the last hour or two had been gradually expanding itself, as it were, in his mind.

And what was the subject of his thoughts, — that subject which had now become all-absorbing and all-engrossing as he sat with his elbows resting upon the table and his hands supporting his head? He had made up his mind to fly from England, and he had procured the means of doing so. In a few hours he meant to be off. In a word, he had resolved upon bidding farewell to England for ever. Then why depart with barely four hundred pounds in his pocket? What a beggarly amount, what a wretched sum, for a man who had been accustomed to command the use of thousands! Could he not by some means treble or quadruple the sum which he had in his possession? Yes, there was a method which he might adopt, and this was by means of a forgery.

Such was the idea on which Emmerson now pondered. He examined the matter in all its bearings, weighed its chances of success, calculated all the risks of discovery.

Well does the proverb say that " the man who deliberates is lost." Whenever an evil idea enters the head, if the individual have not the courage to seize it by the neck at once as he would a snake that turned to bite him, he is led by an invisible fascination to look at it in the face, examine it, reflect upon it, and suffer it to haunt him until it becomes his master at last. So was it with Emmerson, and having thus yielded to the influence of his iniquitous promptings, he proceeded with careful deliberation to execute the crime.

A bill of exchange, payable at twenty-one days after date, was duly drawn up by his experienced hand, and across it he forged the names of a large trading firm with whom he had had many previous transactions and whose respectability was sufficient to render the bill easy of negotiation. It was for the amount of fifteen hundred guineas, and looked altogether, in Emmerson's estimation, as genuine a document as ever was presented for discount. But nevertheless, the moment he had put the finishing stroke to the forgery, he felt a strange sensation pass over him, as if his position had changed all in a moment, and bad as it was before, had now become ten thousand times worse. Five minutes back, and it was merely the bankruptcy court and the King's Bench that threatened him; now he had laid himself open to the Old Bailey and Newgate. Ay, and this was not all, for with the mere fact of tracing those few black lines upon a slip of paper, the still blacker spars of the gibbet had suddenly started up before his view.

But Emmerson was not the man to be deterred by mere imaginary terrors from his purpose. He was in that condition which is most friendly to the designs of Satan, most favourable to the temptations in which the Evil One seeks to ensnare frail humanity. Accordingly, Emmerson put the bill into his pocketbook, and issuing forth, paused in the front office to say, " Well, Mr. Varian, it is time to lock up. Be here early in the morning, as we shall then go over the books together."

With these words the bill-broker took his departure, hugging the idea that his intention was totally unsuspected by his clerk; but had he seen the strange expression which passed over Varian's countenance the instant the door closed behind him, he would not have felt so happy nor so confident in the course which he was pursuing.

Proceeding straight to his bankers, he entered the spacious establishment, — one of those which are said to render Lombard Street the richest in the world. Without pausing at the counter, he passed straight on to the private parlour, and there, in an offhand manner and with his usual tone of confidence, he handed the bill to one of the partners, requesting that it might be discounted. The demand was promptly complied with; Emmerson received the money, and sallied forth from the bank. He then returned to his office, which Theodore Varian had in the meantime quitted, but only to keep watch upon his master and dog his movements.

Procuring the key from the housekeeper who had charge of the chambers, Emmerson was enabled to penetrate into the offices, and shutting himself up in his private room, he went carefully over his papers, destroying a great number, and retaining a few which he believed to be necessary or useful for his future purposes. It did not strike him that Editha's letter had been abstracted. Now that so many grave and important matters pressed upon his attention, he did not even recollect that he had placed any one of her letters in his writing-desk.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when Emmerson issued forth again from his chambers, thinking to himself that he was bidding them farewell for ever. At that moment he experienced a sad and painful tightening at the heart. Not that he thought of the wife and daughter, whom he had resolved to leave behind him and abandon to poverty and all its attendant evils; no, it was of lost position that he thought so regretfully, and he inwardly cursed himself for having allowed extravagance and folly thus to hurl him from the pedestal of that happiness which, according to the fashion of his own mind, he had at one time created.

Entering a hackney-coach near the Mansion House, he ordered the driver to take him to the Bull and Mouth, Piccadilly. That establishment was at the time of which we are writing, and for many years afterward, — until the genius of steam wove its web of railways over the surface of the land, — the great central point whence started innumerable coaches for all parts of England. Thither it was that Mr. Emmerson now repaired, and thither also was he closely followed by Theodore Varian.

But the young man was not now alone. He had two persons with him, — none others, indeed, than Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom.

On arriving at the Bull and Mouth, Mr. Emmerson alighted, dismissed the hackney-coach, entered the office, and was making some inquiries at the counter relative to the stages to Liverpool, when he felt a hand suddenly laid upon his shoulder. He started as if it were the touch of death, started as if the invisible fingers of the destroyer had suddenly sent an ice-chill penetrating through his frame, and turning quickly around, he beheld himself face to face with Theodore Varian.

Not a word did he utter, for he saw in a moment that he was lost. The thunderclap of doom sounded, as it were, upon his ear, and he knew that he was betrayed as indubitably as if the young man had already proclaimed the fact from his lips. Besides, those ominous countenances that peered over Varian's shoulder, Emmerson knew them well; for Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom had been the instruments of many and many a bitter persecution waged by the bill-broker against poor wretches who were unable to meet his usurious demands.

" You thought to escape? " said Varian, in a low, hoarse tone, full of concentrated passion, and fixing a look of inexorable bitterness upon the fallen man, " but you are mistaken."

" Stand aside, sir," exclaimed Emmerson, now suddenly recovering the faculty of speech as a ray of hope flashed upon his mind; for, in the first place, it was evident that the forgery had not been discovered, or else they would be criminal and not civil officers who had come to arrest him, and, in the second place, if the writ held by Mr. Ikey was for a sum which Emmerson could pay, as he had nearly two thousand pounds about his person, he might yet get clear off in spite of Theodore Varian. " Now, Mr. Ikey," he said, drawing the Jew aside and speaking in a low tone, so as not to be overheard by the clerks and other persons transacting business in the coach-office, " what claim have you against me? "

" Three thousand four hundred," Theodore hastened to observe, his voice sounding ominous as that of doom over Emmerson's shoulder. " I persuaded your largest creditor

to do it, and if you can pay that amount, then I am very much mistaken."

"Tree tousand four hundred guinish ish de sum," said Mr. Ikey, corroborating Theodore's statement, "and my expenshes ish a mere trifle, Mishter Emmershon. You know as well as mosht men what ish de expenshes in dese matters," and Mr. Ikey gave a coarse, familiar grin. "But come, let's step into de public-housh closh by, and talk it over."

"It is of no use," interjected Theodore, sternly. "Let him pay the money, Mr. Ikey, or go to prison. You know that I represent the creditor in this instance."

"Dish de truth wot he say, Mishter Emmershon," observed the sheriff's officer, in an ominous undertone, as much as to imply that he could show no mercy even if he were inclined.

Pale and trembling, the wretched Emmerson was utterly unable to conceal the horrible alarms that were now torturing him, for he saw that if he were plunged into a debtor's prison, it would only be with the certainty of removal in a short time to Newgate, when the forgery should be discovered. But the very desperation of his case suddenly inspired him with a last hope, and in a quick, anxious voice, he said to the Jew, "Mr. Ikey, you have known me for many, many years, you have had a great deal of money through the business I have put in your way, and you will now take my word that I will call upon you to-morrow — "

"'Tish impossible, Mishter Emmershon," interrupted Ikey. "My orders ish poshitive. Tom, keep de door."

"All right," growled the bailiff's follower, planting himself on the threshold.

"You will take fifteen or sixteen hundred guineas as a guarantee of my good intentions," said Emmerson, actually writhing with the anguish of his thoughts.

But the sheriff's officer shook his head, and Emmerson felt a cold perspiration burst forth all over him. The condition of the wretched man was indeed most deplorable, and visibly did his looks grow so haggard, even as he stood there in that public office, that in the space of three or four minutes twenty years seemed to have been added to his life.

As a last resource he turned toward Varian, and in a manner so humbled and with accents so full of pitiable

entreaty that he now indeed appeared a spectacle well calculated to provoke contempt, he said, " Theodore, I forgave you. Cannot you forgive me? For God's sake, have mercy upon me. If you say the word, I feel convinced that this Jew will take what I have to offer and let me go. You have declared that you are empowered by the creditor to do the best for his interests — "

" Viper! " was the low but bitter, oh, fearfully bitter and venomously malignant ejaculation which suddenly hissed, as it were, from Theodore's lips and struck the wretched Emmerson dumb at once.

To be brief, the bill-broker, with despair in his heart and frenzy in his brain, was forced to surrender himself into the keeping of Mr. Moses Ikey, and in half an hour he found himself a prisoner in that very same sponging-house to which he had in his time sent so many, many victims of his usury.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SHAM DUEL

It was soon after six o'clock on the following morning, that a carriage and pair entered upon Wormwood Scrubs, in those times, and even down to the latest days, a famous resort for duellists. It is at no great distance from London, but is nevertheless sufficiently retired and lonely for the purpose to which it seems specially appropriated, and when viewed at that gray hour of the morning, the scene presented an aspect more than usually savage and desolate.

Forth from the carriage descended the redoubtable Tash, with a pistol-case under his arm, and with an air of such swaggering importance that it seemed as if he had come out into the suburbs because London itself was too confined to hold him. He was followed by Lord Sackville and Doctor Thurston, and leaving the carriage, they advanced to some distance, where they were met by Lord Curzon, the Honourable George Macnamara, and Doctor Copperas.

Curzon and Sackville appeared to take no notice of each other, but Captain Tash at once walked up to Macnamara, and seizing him by the hand, shook it so heartily that the gentleman on whom he thus bestowed this mark of his cordiality actually writhed in the captain's iron grasp.

"Glad to see you this morning, my dear fellow," said Tash. "You and I have met before at drinking bouts, and in one or two street rows, but never on so agreeable an occasion as the present, and my only regret is that we are not the principals instead of the seconds."

"Captain Tash," said the Honourable George Macnamara, somewhat coldly, "you must be well aware that we have no time to waste in idle comments. Come, let us measure

the ground, load the pistols, and get over this business as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible!" vociferated Captain Tash, looking both amazed and indignant. "You may as well tell me, when I have paid my money at the door of the theatre, that the performances are to be hurried over with the most indecent haste, or that if I am sitting down to a good dinner, I must not detain the dishes above a minute. By all daggers and wounds! I, Rolando Tash, protest against such a doctrine."

"Well, well, captain," said Macnamara, "you and I will not dispute."

"Egad! but I think that it is most likely we shall," retorted the gallant officer. "The fact is, I have not shot a man for the last six or seven years, and I think it is high time I should do so, just to keep my hand in."

"Be pleased to understand, Captain Tash," said Macnamara, with mingled hauteur and contempt, "that I am no coward, but at the same time I am not to be bullied into a duel with any one."

"Bullied!" roared Tash, his voice now sounding half-across the scene of action, and his countenance becoming as red as the comb of a turkey-cock, "what do you mean, sir?"

But here Horace at once interfered, peremptorily whispering to the captain that if he did not command his temper the post of "second" should be withdrawn from him, whereupon the gallant officer, though grumbling somewhat at what he called "the liberty of the subject being interfered with, when merely seeking to blow another's brains out," consented to proceed to the business of the meeting without further comment or noise.

Meanwhile Doctor Copperas and Doctor Thurston had stepped up to each other, shaken hands, and exchanged their usual compliments in that fashion which constitutes the "aside" of the stage, namely, appearing to say something which is not meant to be overheard, but in reality bawling it out loud enough to make every word audible to all present.

"My dear Doctor Copperas," said Thurston, "who would have thought of meeting you here this morning and under such circumstances? But I must say that in the midst of

the gloom which this pending duel naturally throws around us, nothing could give me greater satisfaction than to find that you are present on the occasion, for I am well aware that no member of the faculty has devoted more attention to wounds by bullets than yourself."

"Unless, my dear Doctor Thurston," said Doctor Copperas, "it is yourself. Indeed, as I said in the *Medical Reformer* last week, there is no follower of Esculapius living who has the same experience as you in a certain class of hurts and injuries."

"Why, my dear Doctor Copperas," said Doctor Thurston, "it was the very same opinion that I passed upon you, at the very same time, too, in the *Scalpel*."

And as they thus spoke, the two physicians threw a sidelong glance toward the duellists and the seconds, to observe whether their dialogue produced any effect upon those noblemen and gentlemen.

Meantime Captain Tash and the Honourable Mr. Macnamara were getting on more comfortably together than at first. Each had a pistol-case containing a pair of the murderous weapons, a flask of gunpowder, and several bullets, and they proceeded to load in each other's presence.

"These are Sackville's pistols," said Tash, "and a very excellent pair they seem to be. I could wing a fellow at twenty paces with them."

"And these pistols are mine," observed Macnamara. "Curzon did not possess a pair of duelling pistols."

"Neither would Sackville have had these," remarked the gallant officer, "unless I had assured him some weeks ago that it was highly necessary for a finished gentleman — we put the nobleman out of the question in this sense — to have a pair of such barkers as these. Thunder and wounds! I only wish I had the handling of them just now. I could riddle my opponent through and through, and I feel just in the humour to do it, too," added Tash, again looking grimly upon Macnamara, as if he thought it a very great shame, amounting almost to an insult, that this gentleman did not at once take the hint and offer to fight him.

"These are not my bullets, though," said Macnamara, without heeding the captain's last observation. "Curzon gave them to me just now. Did you ever see bullets so

"THE SIGNAL FOR HIRING WAS GIVEN."

[Photogravure from original by Morrell]

"THE SIGNAL FOR FIRING WAS GIVEN"
Photogravure from original by Merrill.

perfectly round and so smooth? They are the prettiest little things I ever beheld in all my life."

"So they are," observed Tash, "and it really makes one envy the lucky dog that is to be riddled with such little darlings. But mine, you perceive, are equally good. I wonder where the deuce Sackville got these splendid bullets from. Like yours, they are as round as possible, and as smooth as an egg. Really it must be quite delicious to receive one's knock-me-down blow from such elegant little bullets," and this time the captain threw a glance of mingled entreaty and reproach upon the Honourable George Macnamara, as much as to say that if the idea of being killed with such pretty bullets did not render him disposed to fight, nothing would.

"Now, are you ready?" asked the latter, still paying no heed to Captain Tash's nonsense.

The ground was measured, Curzon and Sackville were placed at an interval of twelve paces, and while Captain Tash handed a weapon to his principal, Macnamara performed the same kind act toward the other. Doctor Copperas and Doctor Thurston remained standing at some distance, gazing with professional sang-froid upon the duellists. The signal for firing was given by the dropping of Captain Tash's handkerchief, and then, as the pistols exploded, Doctor Copperas suddenly started convulsively, feeling himself all over to ascertain whether one of the bullets might not have diverged and accidentally hit him, while Doctor Thurston, who was braver than his companion, flung a quick glance toward Curzon and Sackville. But he seemed horribly disgusted on observing that neither of them had fallen; for the truth was, that he rather wanted at least one of them, if not both, to be winged or lamed, so that additional éclat might be given to the duel in the newspapers, the effect of which would be a proportionate puff for himself and Doctor Copperas.

But, thanks to Venetia's forethought, no blood was destined to be shed on the present occasion. The bullets which had been used, and which had attracted so much admiration on the part of Mr. Macnamara and Captain Tash, were indeed nothing but thin glass globes filled with quicksilver, and made by a glass-blower to the order of Mr. Plumpstead, the Sackvilles' butler, who had procured the

same on the previous evening. But of course Lord Sackville and Lord Curzon looked as grave and solemn as if it were really a matter of life and death between them, while Macnamara and Tash naturally supposed that everything was fair and proper, as they had not been let into the secret of the sham bullets.

Now, as it was the Earl of Curzon who, being ostensibly the aggrieved party, had challenged Lord Sackville, it was for the former to declare whether he was satisfied by the shots that had been exchanged, and to the ineffable disgust of Captain Tash, Mr. Macnamara said, on the part of his principal, " Lord Curzon has no desire that this should go any further. He now reserves his wrongs for the consideration of that tribunal to which, as a matter of course, he will appeal."

Captain Tash was too conversant with the laws of duelling to persist in compelling the principals to continue hostilities, but " he did not see the slightest reason why himself and Macnamara should not have a round or two with each other, just by way of ball-practice." Such, indeed, was the proposal that he made with all the coolness in the world, and in those very words.

" Since the captain," said Macnamara, coldly, " is so anxious that I should put a bullet through his head, I must really gratify him, in order to get rid of his importunity."

" Not so," exclaimed Lord Curzon, flinging a glance of profound contempt upon Captain Tash, " for in order that there should be a duel, there must be seconds, and I for one shall refuse to act in a case where no true and genuine cause of dispute has arisen."

" And I also shall refuse to serve as a second," said Horace. " Come, Tash, no one doubts your courage, though every one does your prudence. Put up the pistols and let us be gone."

" By Heaven! I wish I had not left Robin at home," said the captain, terribly put out at the idea of having nobody to fight with. " He should exchange shots with me, I swear. It is not once out of a hundred times that I stir out unattended by my man Friday, and now, on the very occasion when he is so much wanted, he is not here. But I have it," he suddenly exclaimed, his countenance brightening up. Then, taking off his big bell-shaped hat, and ad-

vancing in the politest manner possible up to the two doctors, he said, with corresponding urbanity of tone, "Gentlemen, which of you would like to exchange a shot or two on the present very suitable occasion?"

"Permit me, my good sir," said Doctor Copperas, looking very hard at the captain, and, without any further ceremony, he began feeling the valiant officer's pulse, a proceeding which so astonished our friend Tash, that he stood transfixed for upwards of a minute, gazing in speechless astonishment upon the learned member of the faculty.

"Well?" said Doctor Thurston, inquiringly, as he watched the proceedings of his colleague.

"Quick and feverish pulse," said Doctor Copperas. Then, looking with ominous intentness into the captain's face, he said, "Go home, sir, get your hair cut close, put a blister behind your ears, avoid all alcoholic drink, keep yourself very quiet indeed, and don't eat too much meat, nor let that be underdone, for you are assuredly of a sanguineous temperament, and, I may indeed say, of sanguinary disposition."

Captain Tash was so astounded at this long and not altogether intelligible harangue that he stood rooted to the spot for nearly a minute; then turning suddenly upon his heel, he muttered to himself, "These fellows understand nothing but boluses and black draughts, and know no more of the laws of honour than I do of the Chinese language."

But here we may close our description of this mock duel, pausing only to observe that the two parties returned to town in their respective vehicles, neither the seconds nor the physicians having entertained the slightest suspicion that a conjurer's trick had suggested the idea for the bullets which were used upon the occasion.

And now, as Captain Tash had predicted, Horace Sackville indeed became the lion of the day. His name was in everybody's mouth; that is to say, in all the fashionable quarters of the metropolis. Envied and courted as he had been before, his popularity among a certain class increased a thousandfold. "Oh, that naughty Sackville! That dear, delightful, wicked Horace! That dangerous duck of a man!" and other expressions of a similar character were heard in all the drawing-rooms at the West End. That Venetia should take no possible notice of the matter, but appear as

if she were not even acquainted with her husband's " naughty doings " at all, was quite consistent with the aristocratic and fashionable idea in such matters. But there was not a titled demirep nor a patrician courtesan who did not affect to speak with the most contemptuous pity of the disgraced and lost Countess of Curzon, so that while Horace the seducer was everywhere caressed and flattered, Editha the seduced was everywhere spoken of with an ironical commiseration.

" Poor creature! " said the demireps and scandal-mongers, " she is done for now. But it is just what was to be expected, considering the family she belongs to."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SECOND JOURNEY ON THE CONTINENT

The reader has doubtless ere this begun to experience some surprise that we have so long appeared to lose sight of Jocelyn Loftus, but we now propose to turn our attention to that excellent and high-souled young man.

It will be recollected that when last we saw him it was in London, whither he had proceeded from Canterbury in obedience to a letter privately written to him by the Princess Sophia. It was on that occasion also that he had attended the private theatricals at Carlton House, and that he had experienced such strange feelings on beholding Lady Sackville upon the mimic stage. Nor less will it be remembered that the interview which he succeeded in obtaining with the prince regent terminated only in inspiring him with loathing and disgust for the royal voluptuary. Indeed, so convinced was he of the unmitigated profligacy and dissoluteness of the prince that he felt persuaded it would be altogether useless to intercede with such a man on behalf of his injured wife. Therefore was it that Jocelyn, after having written a letter to Venetia and after a second interview with the Princess Sophia, returned to Canterbury.

But, as a matter of course, his presence at the private theatricals had been duly reported to Mrs. Owen at Richmond and to the queen at Windsor; and as it was believed from the fact of his having sought an audience of the prince that he was still interesting himself in the affairs of the Princess of Wales, the conspirators had immediately resolved to place a spy upon his actions. Thus was it that on his return to Canterbury he was followed by a trustworthy agent of those conspirators.

We must here observe that at his second interview with

the Princess Sophia he had obtained from her Royal Highness a letter of introduction and recommendation to the Princess of Wales; and provided with this credential, he resolved to put his already well-considered scheme into execution, namely, to set out on another journey to seek the injured wife of the regent. As a matter of course, he dared not pass through France, and he had to choose between two distinct routes in order to reach Italy, where the princess was at that time, for it was the month of December to which we are now for a brief space referring. In the first place, Jocelyn might proceed through Belgium, along the Rhine to Switzerland, and thence into Italy; or, in the second place, he might embark on board some vessel bound for the Mediterranean and thus land on the Italian coast. But in consequence of the inclemency of the wintry season and the probable delay that might arise from adverse winds, he renounced the latter project in favour of the former one; and to this course he was more inclined by the gentle persuasion of the charming Louisa, who shuddered at the thought of his encountering the perils of the sea. But we should observe that although the beautiful maiden thus found herself so soon compelled to separate from her lover again, and though she was not without misgivings that he might become exposed to fresh dangers, yet she did not strive to dissuade him from his generous purpose, because she experienced the deepest sympathy and the kindest commiseration in respect to the persecuted Princess of Wales.

Therefore, after a very short sojourn at Canterbury, Jocelyn Loftus set out again for the Continent, little suspecting that he was now closely watched by the spy whom the conspirators had set to dog his movements. Traversing Belgium, he entered the Prussian territory, and embarked at Cologne upon the Rhine, which he pursued until he reached Basle in Switzerland, and thence he resolved to travel post into Italy. Passing by Neufchatel and Geneva, he in due course arrived at the town of Chambery, which is in the kingdom of Piedmont, but within eight or ten miles of the French frontier. This place he reached on the tenth day after leaving England, and, according to the intelligence which he received, the Princess of Wales and her suite were at that time staying at Milan. Accordingly, Jocelyn Loftus, after having rested at night at Chambery, ordered

a post-chaise for the purpose of prosecuting his journey toward the capital of Lombardy, and now it was that the spy who had so unweariedly pursued him was enabled to carry into effect the instructions he had received ere leaving England. For, by means of bribing the postilions, he induced them to take the road toward the French frontier instead of that leading in the direction of Milan; and as Jocelyn was a perfect stranger to the route and was, moreover, absorbed in his reflections, he did not immediately notice that the vehicle was pursuing a southwestern instead of a southeastern direction. Nor were his suspicions excited until the chaise stopped in about an hour at a little town where the well-known uniforms of the French custom-house officers immediately met his eyes.

Then it immediately struck him that either some strange mistake had been made, or some foul treachery practised, and on inquiring the name of the place, he was informed that it was Les Echelles, a town on the French frontier. His passport was demanded, and with a sore misgiving did he produce it, for he now beheld a certain English traveller whom he had seen at one or two points during his journey prompting the custom-house officers in their present proceeding. We need not inform the reader that this " certain Englishman " was the spy of the conspirators, but we may hasten to observe that Jocelyn was at once taken into custody on the double charge of travelling with a passport made out in a false name, and having escaped from the prefecture of police in Paris. Remonstrance was of course ineffectual, and our young hero was borne off to the prison at Grenoble a large and celebrated French town at a distance of about thirty miles from Les Echelles.

He was not, however, treated with any rudeness or unnecessary harshness, and inasmuch as before he left England he had taken the precaution of having the Princess Sophia's letter sewn in the lining of his coat, it now escaped detection when he was required to produce the contents of his pockets. No stricter personal search than this was made by the officers, and thus the cherished credential passed not away from his possession at the same time with the other papers which were taken from him.

Behold, then, Jocelyn Loftus once more a prisoner in France, a captive, too, at the instance of those same con-

spirators in England who had been the means of provoking his former prisonage.

It is not our purpose to dwell at any considerable length upon this episode in the life of Jocelyn Loftus, but a few particulars are nevertheless necessary in order to give an idea of the treatment which he experienced during the renewed period of imprisonment that was now taking place. Two apartments on the debtors' side of the gaol at Grenoble were furnished in a comfortable and even handsome manner for his reception, a valet was specially appointed to wait upon him, and any orders which he chose to issue relative to his repasts were accurately attended to. One of the yards belonging to the prison was assigned solely to his use for taking exercise, but every precaution was adopted to prevent him from holding the slightest communication with any of the prisoners in the other parts of the establishment.

These details will sufficiently show that the French authorities were well aware that Jocelyn had committed no real offence, but that his captivity suited the purposes of certain high and influential personages in England. The governor of the prison behaved toward him in the most respectful manner, and visited him at least two or three times a week to inquire concerning his health, and ascertain whether all his wants were properly attended to. It was on the occasion of one of the earliest of these visits that the French governor addressed Jocelyn Loftus in the following terms:

" You may rest assured, sir, that not the slightest intention is entertained of using unnecessary harshness toward you, and I am instructed to state that if there be any relation or particular friend in England, or elsewhere, to whom you may wish to write occasionally, in order to relieve their minds from any uneasiness on your account, you are at liberty to do so, and I pledge you my honour as a gentleman that your letters shall be duly transmitted. At the same time, you will of course understand, sir, that you are not to state that you are in captivity, nor yet that you are at Grenoble; but you can date your letters from any other city or town of France, and request that all replies may be sent to the post-office of such town, in which case those answers shall be duly forwarded to you hither. You will also take care to avoid inserting in your letters anything

that may engender the suspicion that you are subject to coercion or restraint; and, in a word, you must place nothing upon record that may lead your friends in England to suspect you are not at liberty, and thus induce them to enter upon intrigues or adopt plans for the discovery of your whereabouts and the accomplishment of your rescue. Of course the letters that you may write will be perused by me before being transmitted to the post, and the answers sent thereto will also have to pass through my hands. Understanding the English language perfectly, I shall reserve this duty of supervision to myself, instead of entrusting it to any underling or interpreter. Thus, sir, so long as you adhere to the conditions which I have laid down, you need not hesitate to place on record any sentiment or feeling of a near and tender interest, for it will be through no motive of impertinent curiosity that I shall inspect your correspondence, and therefore I shall have neither eyes nor memory for anything that may appear therein, save and except whatever may infringe upon the rules which I have laid down."

Although revolting against the shackles thus imposed upon the manner of conducting his correspondence, Jocelyn nevertheless bridled his indignation, being only too glad at the permission thus accorded to write to any one in England at all. He accordingly decided upon addressing his letters from Lyons, that being the nearest large city to Grenoble, and, as a matter of course, it was to Louisa, his well-beloved Louisa, that he wrote. In his letters to her he first stated that circumstances which he should explain when next they met compelled him to date from Lyons, but that she need not be alarmed on perceiving that he was in France. Subsequently, as week after week of his imprisonment passed away and he was still compelled to date from Lyons, he declared that the circumstances previously alluded to in his earlier correspondence remained unchanged, but he carefully avoided any allusion that might lead his beloved Louisa to fancy that he was unhappy. On the contrary, he wrote in cheerful terms, far more cheerful than he felt; and this he did, not only to avoid infringing on the conditions so specifically laid down by the governor, but likewise because he did not choose to torture the charming girl by arousing any suspicions or fears in her mind relative to his actual position. For he saw plainly enough that even were

she to ascertain the exact truth as to the circumstances in which he was placed, she could not help him; and thus, for more reasons than one, did he write in a manner as cheerful, as reassuring, and as encouraging as possible.

Louisa's answers were in the tenderest and most affectionate strain, and it was evident that, although she suspected not his captivity, she nevertheless would have felt more completely at her ease if he were out of France altogether. But as several weeks passed away, and she found (as she fancied) that he had nothing to complain of, and no perils or calamities to report, she grew tranquillized as to his continued sojourn on the French soil. At the same time, she frequently expressed her surprise at his protracted residence in Lyons when the English newspapers stated that "a certain royal lady and her suite" were sojourning elsewhere; but when the fair Louisa's letters did contain an allusion of this kind, it was invariably followed by some such observations as these: "However, you are no doubt acting for the best, and I shall await your return in much suspense to hear from your own lips all that you are doing. You assure me that you are in good health and that I need not alarm myself as to your safety; you likewise give me the most affectionate assurances of your unchanging love, and, therefore, what else can I require?"

Most dear to Jocelyn were these letters that he received from his beloved Louisa. They were indeed his whole and sole solace, for he knew not when his captivity was likely to terminate. The governor had repeated to him those same proposals which were made by the prefect in Paris, namely, that if he would sign a solemn bond pledging himself to future non-interference in the affairs of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, he should be immediately set at liberty; but to this condition, which our hero considered derogatory and dishonourable to a degree, he positively refused to subscribe. He therefore remained in prison, wondering how long it would be ere circumstances might take such a turn as to give him his release.

Thus weeks and months passed away, and at length, in the early part of March, the starting intelligence was one morning communicated to Jocelyn's ears that Napoleon Bonaparte, having fled from his little sovereignty of Elba, had landed in France and was advancing with a handful of

men toward Grenoble. Still the governor maintained his authority in the prison, and when the emperor — for as such did he return to France — entered Grenoble and was immediately joined by the garrison of the place, Jocelyn besought that his case might be represented to the imperial hero. The governor, however, assured Jocelyn that his instructions were to the effect that the affair of his imprisonment was to be kept altogether secret, and that so long as the present Minister of the Interior remained in power at Paris, he (the governor) could know no other authority. Thus Jocelyn's hopes of being enabled to obtain his freedom through the intervention of Napoleon were for the moment defeated.

Toward the end of March the emperor reached Paris, Louis XVIII and his Ministers all flying precipitately. A new Cabinet was of course installed, and so soon as the intelligence thereof reached Grenoble, the governor of the prison, who was naturally a kind-hearted man, hastened to Loftus, exclaiming, " Now at last may I venture to report your case to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor Napoleon."

Jocelyn was at first overjoyed at this apparent change in the circumstances of his position, but his spirits were somewhat damped again when the governor observed that there was a rumour of a general outbreak of hostilities in consequence of Napoleon's return, and that if this were true Jocelyn might still be retained in captivity as a prisoner of war. However, without being dismayed by this probability, and wasting no precious time in gloomy forebodings, Jocelyn drew up such a memorial as he thought would appeal to the generosity of Bonaparte, and this was at once transmitted to Paris, along with a corroborative report drawn up by the governor of the prison. It was not to be expected that very prompt attention would be paid thereto, for the emperor was necessarily immersed in business, and nearly a month accordingly passed ere a response was received. At length it came, and was entirely favourable to Jocelyn's views. In an official document from the Minister of the Interior, it was methodically set forth that " the French authorities had no right to constitute themselves policemen or gaolers to suit the aims of a foreign prince; and that as for Jocelyn Loftus being detained on the ground of travelling with a false name, such a satisfactory explanation had been given

in the memorial sent to his Imperial Majesty that the immediate release of the aforesaid Jocelyn Loftus was ordained."

Thus was it that at the commencement of May our hero recovered his freedom, and in the sincerest manner did he express his gratitude to the governor for such kindnesses as he had experienced at his hands. He at once took a post-chaise and proceeded to Chambery in the Piedmontese dominions, and here he learned that the Princess of Wales with her suite was residing at a beautiful villa in the neighbourhood of Geneva. But ere he pursued his journey, Jocelyn wrote a long letter to Louisa, explaining to her everything that had taken place, — how he had been imprisoned at Grenoble, and the circumstances under which he had penned all his correspondence with her and had received her replies. He also poured forth in an enthusiastic strain his declarations of unvarying affection, for he felt that he could now give free vent to his feelings in that respect without the risk of having his letters read by stranger eyes. He also said that he was at present on his way to Geneva to see the princess, and he hoped that in a very short time he should be enabled to return to England and conduct his beloved Louisa to the altar. He also wrote a letter to Lady Sackville, with the contents of which we are not, however, at this period of our narrative, supposed to be acquainted.

Having passed the night at Chambery, Jocelyn started at an early hour on the ensuing morning for Geneva, and as he was borne in the post-chaise along one of those splendid roads for which all the provinces of Savoy and Piedmont are famous, he weighed in his mind the course that he ought to adopt in fulfilling the mission with which he had charged himself toward the injured wife of the prince regent. If she were still surrounded by the spies and agents of the conspirators, as he had every reason to suspect, it would perhaps be difficult for him to obtain access to her; and if the three Misses Owen still formed a part of her household, they would not merely do all they could to prevent her Royal Highness from granting him an audience, but might even have recourse to representations calculated to blacken his character. He knew how completely her Royal Highness had been under the supervision of the spies and enemies

who surrounded her, and there was every reason to suppose that this supervision had not been relaxed during the last four or five months. Thus, though he was on the highroad to Geneva, and though he would soon be within sight of the princess's dwelling, and perhaps able to advance up to her very front door, yet was it possible that, after all, he might experience considerable difficulty in obtaining access to her.

Having duly considered these matters, Jocelyn determined upon entering Geneva in as private a manner as possible, and instead of taking up his quarters at one of the fashionable hotels, procure some humbler lodging, so that he might stand the less risk of having his presence known in the city previous to obtaining an interview with the princess. On arriving within four miles of Geneva, at about three o'clock in the afternoon, Jocelyn halted at a village the picturesque appearance of which delighted him so much that he longed to ramble for an hour or two in its beautiful environs. Moreover, as he had determined upon entering Geneva at dusk, he thought he could not do better than dine at this village, and he accordingly ordered the post-chaise to be put up at the little inn which occupied a prominent position amongst the few buildings constituting the place. Before he set out for his ramble, he sought the landlord to give instructions relative to his dinner, and the pretty peasant-girl who acted as waitress introduced him to the master of the establishment, a stout good-looking man, who at the moment was engaged in conversation with another traveller. This individual had just arrived in a chaise, and was a thin, pale-faced, keen-eyed man, dressed in black.

"I propose to stay here until the evening," said Loftus, who, as the reader is well aware, was proficient in the French language, which was spoken in all that district, "and on my return from a little ramble which I am about to take in your beautiful neighbourhood, I shall be ready for such fare as you may be enabled to provide me."

"This gentleman is also going to dine here in a couple of hours," said the landlord, indicating the individual in black. "Perhaps you two gentlemen would like to dine together?"

There was no objection raised on either side to this proposal, and Jocelyn accordingly set out for his ramble, with the understanding that dinner would be ready at five o'clock. During the interval our young hero wandered amongst the

delicious groves, through the verdant fields, and amidst the vineyards, orchards, and gardens which formed the environs of the beautiful village whose name we have forgotten, but which everybody who has travelled in those parts cannot fail to recognize.

At five o'clock he returned to the inn, and was introduced by the pretty waitress into a neatly furnished parlour, looking upon a garden, whence the evening breeze, balmy and fragrant, was wafted through the open window. The table was laid with characteristic neatness, and the pale-faced gentleman in black, who was to be Jocelyn's companion at the repast, was already there. He was a native of the country, and spoke French with that peculiar but by no means disagreeable accent which marks the Genevese. His appearance was not altogether prepossessing, but Jocelyn was not accustomed to judge men thereby, and as his companion proved to be endowed with great conversational powers, our hero soon forgot his sinister looks in the charms of his discourse. It appeared that he was a professional man residing at Geneva, and that he had come to the little village that afternoon to inspect some property in the neighbourhood which he was desirous of purchasing.

The fact of the Genevese gentleman giving this account of himself was a sort of invitation for Jocelyn to do the same, and our hero accordingly said that he was an Englishman having some particular business of a private character to transact at Geneva, where he did not, however, expect to make a very long stay. He then asked if his companion happened to know whether the Princess of Wales had a large retinue, and in what style she was living.

The Genevese gentleman seemed rather struck by the circumstance that these questions should follow so closely upon the explanation previously given by our hero, and perhaps he inferred therefrom that " the business of a private character " which was taking Jocelyn to Geneva was in some way or another connected with the princess.

" Her Royal Highness," he said, " is living handsomely, but quietly," and here a peculiar smile for a moment curled the individual's lips, — a smile which was so slight and so transitory that it would have escaped observation altogether if its expression had not been so very strange and even sinister.

" But I presume she has rendered herself much liked by her charities, and much respected by her virtues," said Jocelyn, " for she is an excellent lady, a most amiable princess, and one whose purity of character has defied all the slander of her enemies."

" No doubt of it," said the Genevese gentleman, but with a dryness of tone and a peculiarity of manner which Jocelyn could not possibly help observing. " But what do they say of her in England, sir? " he asked.

" The great majority of the people," replied Loftus, " those, indeed, who do not pander to courtly profligacy, and are not deceived by the prejudices propagated and fostered by the blind worshippers of royalty, know that she is innocent of every evil which is imputed to her. Yes, and they know also that she is the victim of a base, systematic, and cowardly persecution."

" You are warm in her defence, sir," remarked the professional gentleman, as he sipped his wine; for we should observe that dinner was served up immediately after Jocelyn entered the room, and that he and his companion were now seated at a table where, although it was but at a small village inn, all the dainties of the season were spread, forming indeed an admirable specimen of the united kitchens of France, Savoy, and Switzerland.

" Yes, I defend the princess, sir," replied Jocelyn, " because I know that she is a victim and not a guilty woman. The vilest charges have been at different times made against her, the most atrocious calumnies have been levelled at her — But you will pardon me, sir, if I grow warm upon this subject, for I feel indignant, as a man and as an Englishman, at the treatment which this foreign princess has experienced from the cold-blooded sensualist, her husband. Can you tell me, sir, whether in her Royal Highness's household there are three young ladies named Owen? "

" Yes, I believe so," was the reply, " and, if I mistake not, they are three very beautiful girls. Yes, to be sure," exclaimed the Genevese, as if suddenly recalling something to mind, " I remember that I once spoke to two of them."

" Ah! then you are acquainted with the persons attached to her Royal Highness? " said Jocelyn, interrogatively.

" No, not to say acquainted," answered the professional

gentleman. "I have had the honour of speaking to two or three of them, as I just now stated."

"Have you ever been inside the villa which her Royal Highness inhabits?" asked Jocelyn, not thinking that there was anything at all indiscreet in the question.

"Yes — no," returned the Genevese, suddenly correcting his first reply. "That is to say, I was once there, but — "

And stopping suddenly short, he had recourse to his wine-glass, as if to get rid of the necessity of saying any more upon the subject.

"I beg your pardon," said Jocelyn, "if I have been putting rude or impertinent queries to you."

"Oh, not at all, not at all, I can assure you," exclaimed the professional gentleman, again becoming all urbanity and politeness.

"We will talk upon another subject," said Jocelyn, perceiving that the former topic was somehow or another disagreeable or embarrassing, and he accordingly began to expatiate upon the beauties of the adjacent scenery and picturesque view which was obtained of the mountains of Jura in the distance.

He found his companion perfectly ready to discourse upon the charming features of his own native clime, and thus the remainder of the dinner-hour was passed away agreeably enough. On the Continent it is not the custom to linger over the wine, and accordingly, soon after the dessert was placed upon the table, coffee was served up, and the landlord then came to announce that the professional gentleman's chaise was in readiness. That individual thereupon took his leave of Jocelyn, without any proposal that they should renew their acquaintance at Geneva; but this was by no means extraordinary, inasmuch as though people may get on very friendly terms together at foreign *tables d'hote*, it does not at all follow that the intimacy should continue when once they rise from table.

"Who is that gentleman?" inquired Loftus of the landlord when his dinner-companion had taken his departure in the hired chaise, or fly, which had brought him thither in the afternoon.

"I do not know, sir; I never saw him before," was the answer. "He came to inquire about a house and garden which are to sell in the neighbourhood, but either they did

not suit his purposes or the price was too high, and so nothing has come of it. When will you have your post-chaise got ready, sir?"

"Not until sunset," answered Jocelyn. "The environs of your village are so beautiful that I shall take another ramble ere I proceed to the city."

Our hero accordingly set off again to visit the adjacent scenery, for, as we have already stated, he did not wish to enter Geneva until it was dusk, the more surely to escape the notice of the Misses Owen, should they happen to be rambling or riding in the suburbs which he would have to traverse. But, seduced, as it were, by the beauty of the scenes amongst which he was now roving, and also giving way to the luxury of those thoughts which were inspired by his recovered freedom and the hope of shortly returning to England to make Louisa his bride, Jocelyn did not notice that he was still bending his steps farther and farther away from the village, although the sun was now setting. At the moment he awoke from a delicious reverie to the consciousness of the fact, he found himself almost close upon the margin of one of those sinuosities of the lake's configuration which indent its southwestern shore.

The hour was delicious. The last beams of the setting sun were glimmering above the heights in the horizon; a gentle breeze prevailed, just sufficient to give a welcome freshness after the heat of the day, but not to ruffle the surface of the lake; and the shepherd's pipe in the distance, the lowing of cattle, and the bleating of sheep, indicated that the herds and flocks were being driven home from the pastures. Although now recollecting that he must be a good three miles from the village, and that the hour was already come when he had ordered the post-chaise, Jocelyn could not help lingering on the margin of the lake to contemplate the effects of the departing sunlight playing flickeringly on that blue mass of sleeping water, while the white sails of a vessel also caught those beams ere they disappeared altogether. And at a distance of about half a mile might be seen the steeples and towers of Geneva, around which, however, the obscurity of evening was now gradually drawing its veil. Altogether the scene was most beautiful, the hour most delicious, and Jocelyn's heart appeared to leap within his breast as he contrasted the enjoyment of freedom

and the power to range and rove amidst nature's sweetest spots at will with the monotony and the suffocating sensation experienced in the tomblike walls of a prison.

While he was thus standing upon the bank of Lake Leman, with the shades of evening closing in around him, he suddenly heard the tones of a female voice at a little distance. Listening more attentively, he could perceive that they were the accents of anguish, the wail of bitter repinings and of despair. Suddenly they ceased, and Jocelyn, straining his eyes in the direction whence they came, thought he could distinguish a female figure higher up the bank toward Geneva. Hesitating whether he should advance and ascertain if it were any distress that admitted of his power to alleviate, or whether such a proceeding might not be an intrusion upon the sanctity of a sorrow that had perhaps sought the solitude of the place and hour to give itself vent and indulge in the luxury of unseen tears, he remained standing where he was. But in a few moments he heard a heavy plunge, as of a human being falling into the water, followed by a gurgling sound. Not another instant did he hesitate, but speeding toward the spot, he at the moment beheld a female, clad in a dark dress, rise to the surface of the lake. Plunging in, Jocelyn grasped her garments, and with some difficulty drew her to land.

She was not altogether senseless, but panted and gasped fearfully, so that he thought life must pass away in the midst of those strong spasms. He scarcely knew how to assist her, for delicacy prevented him from tearing open her garments so as to allow free scope for the expansion of her chest and the full play of the air in her lungs, but he was about to sacrifice this sentiment to the emergency of the case, when the lady appeared to revive all in a moment. We say lady, because such she seemed to be, as well as Jocelyn could make any observation concerning her in the uncertain light which dimly shone upon the scene.

" Oh, what have you done? " she exclaimed, in accents penetrated with despair, as she glanced wildly around and then fixed her eyes upon Jocelyn; but the next moment springing from his arms as he was supporting her, she rushed down the bank and plunged again into the water.

Fortunate was it for her that the moon now suddenly broke forth in all its splendour, bathing the surrounding

heights, the buildings of the city, and the surface of the lake in a flood of the purest silver, so that Loftus at once marked where the lady rose again to the surface, and springing in once more, he caught her, at the very instant she was about to sink, by her long dark hair which was floating like a mourning veil upon the water. Again, therefore, did our young hero rescue the desperate fair one from a watery grave, but as he dragged her up the bank, she struggled violently to disengage herself from his grasp and accomplish her suicidal purpose. For nearly a minute Jocelyn was placed in extreme danger by this proceeding on her part, but he succeeded in retaining the footing he had gained when having dragged the lady within his depth, and despite her resistance he once more landed her safely on the bank.

"I do not thank you, sir, I do not thank you," she said, in English, while gasping for breath. "You have brought me back to a life whence I am resolved to fly."

"Oh, lady," cried Jocelyn, reproachfully, "is it indeed a countrywoman of mine own, a daughter of England, who speaks in such shocking terms?"

"Pardon me, sir, pardon me," exclaimed the lady, her heart suddenly touched by the kindness of Jocelyn's manner, although his words were reproachful. "To you, at least, I owe nothing but gratitude in risking your life twice to save mine."

Thus speaking, she unresistingly suffered him to conduct her away from the brink of the lake, but scarcely had they proceeded twenty yards, when she sank down in a state of exhaustion, though still retaining her consciousness.

Jocelyn raised the lady, and placed her against a bank. He then sat down by her side, urging her to compose her feelings and summon all her presence of mind to her aid, for he feared lest, when her physical energies should return, she might make another attempt upon her life. While thus addressing her, he had an opportunity of observing her more attentively than at first. Her bonnet and shawl, as he was presently informed, had come off when she first plunged into the lake, and her hair was now flowing, dripping with wet and in the wildest disorder, over her shoulders. She wore a mourning dress of excellent texture, and her appearance, despite all present disadvantages, fully indicated her social position to be that of a lady in good circum-

stances. Her features were regular and handsome, her complexion was dark, but now somewhat sallow rather than pale, through grief, and her countenance had a haggard expression. She possessed a fine figure, with a noble bust, and was apparently about twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age.

Such was the hurried survey which Jocelyn was enabled to take of the lady whom he had rescued from death, and at the expiration of two or three minutes the thoughts which forced themselves upon her mind seemed to effect a great change within her.

"It was in a moment of madness, of utter despair," she said, suddenly breaking silence and turning her large dark eyes full upon our hero, "that I made the rash, the wicked attempt upon my life, which your timely presence and noble conduct so providentially frustrated. And, oh, it was the shame, the bitterness, the rage, at having been rescued a first time which made me still more desperate the second time. But, ah!" she abruptly exclaimed, "what must you think of me? What will the world think of me?"

"Lady," said Jocelyn, in a deep and earnest tone, "I am a man of honour, and will never breathe to a living soul, without your permission, the occurrence of this evening. As for what I may think of you, believe me it is in my nature to put the most charitable construction upon your conduct. Then, as for the world, whose opinion you dread so much, wherefore need it ever become acquainted with your secret?"

"Oh, generous young man," exclaimed the lady, with a perfect effusion of gratitude in her accents and in her looks, "you fill me with hope, with confidence, with courage." Then rising abruptly from the bank, she said, "Come, we must depart hence. You shall repair with me to my place of abode, where I will order a change of apparel to be provided you. But of course," she instantaneously added, "it was an accident, and not an attempt at self-destruction."

"Madam, I promise not to betray you," observed Jocelyn, with earnest sincerity, "and if you would prefer that I should leave you this minute, so that I may not learn who you are, by proceeding with you to your own abode —"

"Your generosity is equal to your courage," answered the lady. "But if I am not interfering with your arrangements, you must come with me. I could not think of leaving

you thus dripping from head to foot; your hat, too, is gone. Besides, if I choose to conceal from you who and what I am, I shall have no difficulty in so doing, for I am now residing at Geneva in the utmost seclusion, with a false name, and under very peculiar circumstances," she added, in a voice which suddenly fell to tones of the lowest despondency. "However, it is probable that I may tell you my history, for after what you have done for me, I owe you all possible gratitude and confidence, — yes, and likewise the love which a sister bears toward a brother."

While thus conversing, the lady and Jocelyn walked together away from the lake in the direction of the town. They assuredly presented a somewhat singular appearance, both dripping, with nothing on their heads, and the lady's hair flowing in wet masses over her shoulders. But fortunately they encountered no one until they reached the nearest buildings, and then, as the lady immediately conducted our hero into a narrow and dark street, the few persons whom they did meet there took no particular notice of them.

In this manner they proceeded until they reached a gloomy-looking building, where a lamp was burning over the entrance. Here the lady pulled a bell, the sounds of which, as they met Jocelyn's ears, seemed as if emanating from some cloistral or cavern-like place. The door was almost immediately opened by an individual bearing a light, and Jocelyn at once recognized the gentleman with whom he had that afternoon dined at the adjacent village.

CHAPTER XX

THE TWO DOORS AT THE END OF THE PASSAGE

This recognition was mutual, and the lady at once noticed, with evident surprise, that her deliverer from the depths of Lake Leman was acquainted with the person who had just opened the door in obedience to her summons.

"You know Doctor Maravelli, then?" she immediately said, fixing her eyes upon our hero, and speaking in French.

"I had the pleasure of dining in his company to-day," answered Loftus, in the same language, "but I was not then acquainted with his name. Nor did I anticipate the pleasure of so soon meeting him again."

"It seems as if we were destined to be thrown in each other's way," said Maravelli, with a courteous smile, "and I at once accept that destiny by bidding you welcome to my house. If I did not give you an invitation hither when we parted this afternoon, it was through no disinclination — But, ah! you are both dripping wet. Yes, and hatless the one, without scarf and bonnet the other. Good heavens! all this denotes a splash in the lake — "

"An accident which befell me," the lady hastened to observe, "and to which I am indebted for the honour of this gentleman's acquaintance. Or, rather, I should say, I am indebted to him for my life, and you will admit, Doctor Maravelli, that I could not do otherwise than invite him hither to obtain such change of raiment as you may be enabled to afford?"

"Oh, for that matter no time shall be lost," exclaimed the doctor, "and not only change of raiment too, but a bed shall be cheerfully placed at your disposal, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Jocelyn.

Then, leading the way, he hastily summoned his housekeeper, Mavolta, to whose care the lady resigned herself, while he conducted Jocelyn up a wide but gloomy staircase, along a passage with an array of chamber doors on either side, and the aspect of which was precisely such as would be ascribed by a romance-writer to a house that was haunted. Opening one of the doors, the doctor showed Jocelyn into a bedchamber, handsomely furnished, but in a sombre style. The draperies were heavy, two or three large cupboards of a dark-stained wood filled up the recesses, and there was altogether an absence of that lightness, cheerfulness, and elegance, which usually combine as the attributes of sleeping-apartments in the city of Geneva.

Jocelyn did not, however, loiter to dwell particularly upon the features of the chamber, but hastened to divest himself of his own dripping apparel, and assume the entire change which Doctor Maravelli placed at his disposal. By the time he had thus shifted his raiment, the physician returned to conduct him down-stairs to a handsome dining-room, where a table was spread for supper.

"And now," said Doctor Maravelli, "you must inform me how this accident took place."

"You must know," answered Jocelyn, "that after we separated at the village, I was seduced by the loveliness of the evening to ramble again into the environs ere I came on to Geneva. But not noticing how time was slipping away, nor how far I was walking, I presently reached the border of the lake. In a few minutes I heard a heavy plunge, a splash, a gurgling sound — "

"Ah! I understand," said Maravelli. "My fair lodger, who is most romantically fond of twilight walks and moonlit rambles, was roving in that same direction when she fell in, eh? Some parts of the lake are dangerous enough for the incautious stroller during the obscurity. And so you had the good fortune to rescue her? Then you have not as yet taken up your quarters at any particular place in Geneva?"

"No," replied Loftus. "And now that I bethink me, my prolonged absence from the village inn must excite the strangest suspicions. The landlord will fancy some accident has occurred, or that I have purposely fled."

"I will despatch some one thither with any message you choose to send," said Maravelli. "Of course you will accept

of such hospitality as my humble dwelling can afford for this night? "

" I shall do so with gratitude," returned Jocelyn, " and if to-morrow you can help me to suitable lodgings you will add to the obligations under which I am already placed toward you. To speak plainly, I have business to transact of a somewhat delicate nature, and it accords with my purposes to remain in strict seclusion at Geneva for a day or two."

" Then you wish to find a quiet, retired lodging? " said Maravelli. " In fact, a place where you will be secure against the pryings of impertinent curiosity."

" Such is exactly my desire," returned Jocelyn. " I seek for the utmost privacy."

" Then it is possible," said Maravelli, in a musing tone, " that I myself can accommodate you. But I must see what Madame Roberts says upon the point, as I never take one lodger to the annoyance of another, and very seldom gentlemen at all."

" Ah! what of me? " exclaimed the lady whom Jocelyn had rescued from a watery grave, as she entered the room at the moment.

She had changed all her apparel, but was still dressed in half-mourning, with her hair now arranged in massive bands. She looked what may be termed interestingly handsome, for she was decidedly possessed of a very fine person and of striking features, although her cheeks were colourless and even sunken, and an expression of profound melancholy sat upon her countenance.

" I was just observing, madam," said Doctor Maravelli, as with the greatest respect he placed a chair for her, " that if you had no objection to this gentleman becoming a lodger in my house for a short time, a very short time — "

" Under any other circumstances than those which have this evening occurred," interrupted the lady, with a peculiar look and significant tone as she addressed herself to the doctor, " I should decidedly have objected to any such arrangement."

" Yes, Madame Roberts, I know it, I know it," Maravelli hastened to observe. " Under any other circumstances, no doubt; but as this gentleman was so providentially thrown in your way to snatch you from a watery grave, I think

that he may at once be regarded in the light of a friend, something more than a mere acquaintance, especially as he is a countryman of your own."

"This is precisely the view which I take of the matter," said the lady, who, it appeared, passed by the name of Madame Roberts, "and therefore, if this gentleman — But we are as yet strangers to each other by name," she added, with a mournful smile, "though already speaking of friendship."

"The name that figures upon my passport," said our hero, "is Jocelyn Loftus."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mrs. Roberts, with a sudden start, and she surveyed our hero with evident surprise, curiosity, and interest.

"Is it possible this name is known to you?" asked Jocelyn, though not with any mistrust or alarm, for there was something in the lady's manner, language, and indeed her whole appearance, which convinced him that her own sorrows, whatever they might be, were of too deep and absorbing a character to permit her to harbour treacherous designs toward another, and there was altogether an air of genuine frankness and sincerity about her which placed Jocelyn quite at his ease on that head.

"Yes, the name of Jocelyn Loftus is indeed known to me," she answered, "and honourably so." Then turning to Doctor Maravelli, she said, "By all means, if you can accommodate this gentleman, do so. You have just heard that his name is known to me. I can assure you it is one that would not disgrace the interior of a palace."

It was now Jocelyn's turn to survey with astonishment, curiosity, and interest this lady who thus frankly and generously became a guarantee for his respectability, and who likewise spoke of him in such flattering terms. But she made a rapid sign to him, unperceived by Maravelli, to intimate that this was not the moment for further explanations, and he accordingly withdrew his inquiring looks and held back the verbal questions that were about to issue from his tongue. Almost at the same moment the door opened, and the doctor's housekeeper, Mavolta, entered, bearing a tray on which were served several dishes that sent forth a savoury perfume.

"And now, by the bye," said Maravelli, "relative to

this message which you desire to be sent to the village inn? "

" If it be understood that I am to take up my quarters at your house," answered Jocelyn, " let my baggage be fetched from the inn, the bill paid, and the post-chaise dismissed back to Chambery, where I hired it."

Thus speaking, Jocelyn produced money from his purse to defray the items alluded to, and Mavolta was at once charged with the duty of despatching a messenger to the village inn.

The physician, Mrs. Roberts, and Jocelyn now sat down to supper, and during the meal the conversation turned upon a variety of indifferent topics. The lady, though evidently oppressed by a profound sense of affliction, and also suffering from the exhausting influences of her two immersions in the water and all the excitement which had accompanied those attempts at self-destruction, nevertheless proved an agreeable companion. She strove to be cheerful, and as her conversational powers were by no means limited, she could not make such an effort without succeeding to a certain extent. As for Maravelli, he gave free scope to that garrulous propensity which he really possessed when apart from the considerations of business; and thus, altogether, Jocelyn spent by no means an unpleasant evening.

But still he was under the influence of no ordinary sentiment of curiosity. Who was this Madame or Mrs. Roberts, avowedly living under a feigned name at the house of the Genevese physician? His wife she assuredly was not, because if so, why should the fact be concealed? And his mistress she did not seem to be, inasmuch as he treated her with the utmost deference and respect instead of with familiarity. Indeed, her own deportment was such as to convince Jocelyn that she was really what was represented, namely, a lodger in Doctor Maravelli's house and a boarder at his table. But was it not a singular dwelling for a lady to choose? Whether married or a widow, there seemed something imprudent or suspicious in her fixing her residence beneath such a roof. And that she was a lady by birth, education, and social position, was beyond all doubt. That she had moved in the very best circles, too, was also apparent, for in the course of conversation she let slip a few allusions to personages of the highest rank in England, and with

whom she was evidently acquainted. Nor were these allusions made with the air of one who artfully and purposely suffers her brilliant connections thus to transpire, but whatever Mrs. Roberts said of this kind was given utterance to in all frankness and sincerity. Who, then, could she be, this lady who was surrounded by so much mystery?

Of course Jocelyn had not failed to observe how intent she was upon some inward woe, even while struggling to seem cheerful and to force herself to take a due share in the conversation. Her double attempt at suicide had indeed proven that the grief which she cherished was of the most poignant nature, and during the occasional pauses which occurred in the discourse, Jocelyn observed a sudden expression of ineffable anguish sweep over her features, and then be succeeded with so sinister a gloom that it was by no means difficult to understand that she experienced the goading sense of a deep wrong and cherished an implacable vengeance.

There was a suspicion which Jocelyn had formed concerning this lady from the very first moment he had dragged her forth from the water, for then, as her garments clung closely to her, her shape appeared to indicate that she was in the way to become a mother. But upon this idea the natural delicacy of our hero's feelings did not permit him to dwell, even in the deep recess of his own soul. At the same time, if this suspicion were correct, and if she were a widow, as her mourning garment led him to believe (although she wore not the widow's cap nor characteristic sleeve), then would the circumstance afford a clue to the reading of the mystery concerning her. Indeed, it would then even become almost intelligible enough, without waiting to hear the tale from her own lips, why she sought the retirement of a physician's house in a city so far removed from her native England.

When supper was over, Doctor Maravelli rose from the table and begged to apologize for a brief absence on the plea that he had a patient to visit. Jocelyn and Mrs. Roberts were accordingly left alone together.

"Madam," said our hero, now addressing the lady in English, after a brief silence which had followed the closing of the door behind Doctor Maravelli, "you will pardon me for seeking the earliest opportunity to revive the topic

which was engaging us ere now, — I mean relative to your knowledge of my name."

"I not only know the name of Jocelyn Loftus," said Mrs. Roberts, with a peculiar look, "but also that which is really your own."

"Ah!" ejaculated our hero, "then how is it that I am thus known to you?"

"Hush! we may not speak upon these matters now or here," interrupted the lady. "The doctor may return at any moment, or he may overhear us from some adjacent room, for this is a strange, rambling house, old-fashioned and tortuous in its arrangements as a feudal castle, and there is no knowing from what neighbouring apartment our host may listen to anything that is taking place in this."

"Then do you not think that he has really gone out?" inquired Jocelyn.

"I dare say he has," replied the lady, "but it is quite possible he may return sooner than we expect. He says that he does not understand English, but prudence forbids us from relying on that averment."

"Then will you, madam," asked Jocelyn, "give me an early opportunity of conversing with you alone, and in some place where we shall be free from interruption?"

"Yes, for I also wish to converse with you, and the sooner the better," said Mrs. Roberts. "I am acquainted with your object, I know your design, and if I can possibly forward it — But here am I doing precisely what I counselled you not to do, that is, talking on private matters."

"And yet what suspense shall I remain in until opportunity serves for the promised explanations!" said Jocelyn. "When can you favour me?"

"To-night, if you will," observed Mrs. Roberts, after a few moments' reflection. "We will meet when the house is quiet." Then, as if instantaneously understanding what an equivocal construction might be put upon this proposal, she hastened to observe, "I have no doubt you will be located in one of the rooms opening from the long passage on the first floor. At the end of that passage there is a drawing-room, looking on the garden at the back of the house. I will be there within half an hour from the time that the household retires to rest."

Jocelyn, who at once comprehended the delicacy which

prompted this arrangement, thanked the lady for the appointment so given, and promised to avail himself of it. They then talked upon indifferent matters, and in a few minutes Doctor Maravelli came back. Soon afterward Mrs. Roberts rose for the purpose of retiring to her own room, and when she had taken her departure, the doctor said to Jocelyn, " Now, without seeking in any way to penetrate into your affairs or your business at Geneva, permit me to observe that if I can forward your views or assist you in any way, I shall feel delighted to do so."

Our hero thanked the physician for this proposal, guardedly observing that if he required his succour he would avail himself of it. He then requested to be allowed to retire for the night, and he was accordingly conducted to the same bedroom where he had ere now changed his apparel.

His baggage had been duly fetched from the village inn, and was in the chamber allotted to him. He accordingly whiled away the time by taking out the things that he should require for his morning's toilet, until he thought it time to repair to the room indicated by Mrs. Roberts. She had said that she would be there half an hour after the household should have retired, and when the establishment was silent, but Heaven knows it had all along been silent as the tomb. Indeed, the silence of that house had something ominous and appalling in it. It seemed the silence of the dead. Though Jocelyn was in all the vigour of youth, with the fine, glowing intellect of earliest manhood, endowed with the loftiest courage and the noblest spirit, yet did he feel as if the interior aspect of that house, so sombre and so gloomy, was sufficient to damp his energies and fill him with melancholy forebodings. He thought of the passage outside, with its two arrays of doors, and he wondered if those rooms were tenanted by lodgers, or if they were left to dilapidation and decay. That they were for the most part unoccupied he felt convinced, not merely because he had neither seen nor heard of any lodger save Mrs. Roberts, but likewise because it was impossible that the house could be so still if there were so many inhabitants beneath its roof.

However, Jocelyn's reflections were cut short by the arrival of the moment when he deemed it fit to issue forth from his chamber and seek the drawing-room mentioned

by Mrs. Roberts. He opened the door noiselessly, took the candle in his hand, and proceeded stealthily along the passage. The boards creaked under his feet, the light threw strange shadows upon the wall, and Jocelyn felt, not as if he were threatened by any danger, but as if he were doing something that was wrong. It was a feeling of uneasiness perfectly intelligible and natural under the circumstances.

On reaching the end of the passage, he suddenly found himself placed in an awkward dilemma, for there were two doors fronting him, and he knew not which to choose. He examined both the doors carefully, in order to ascertain if a light glimmered through the keyhole of either; but no, all was darkness. He stooped down and peeped, he likewise listened at each keyhole, but darkness and silence seemed to reign within either apartment. What was he to do? Should he retrace his steps to his own chamber and return presently? Or had the lady been deceiving him? And now, for the first time, did it occur to Loftus that some treachery might be intended him. Yet how and what? No, it could not be. The lady had not thrown herself in his way to seduce him to that house. Their meeting had been purely accidental, and therefore was it unlikely indeed that chance had thus led him through such a train of circumstances into any net previously spread to enmesh him.

All these reflections passed rapidly through Jocelyn's mind in less than a minute, and reassured by the conclusion to which he came, he resolved upon pushing the present adventure to the end. He accordingly opened one of the doors at a venture, and walked into the room with which it communicated. No one was there, and Jocelyn was immediately about to retreat, when, perceiving a number of implements used in chemical pursuits, he was impelled by a feeling of curiosity to pause for an instant and take a closer survey of that apartment. It was not large, had no appearance of a drawing-room, and therefore could not be the one to which Mrs. Roberts had alluded. Indeed, it resembled an alchemist's study, save and except that the furnace inseparable from such a place was not there. A gloomy-looking apartment was it, with these implements of fantastic shapes scattered about, a huge volume, secured with dingy brazen clasps, lying on the floor, and large cupboards occupying the deep recesses, all serving to conjure up ideas of

those laboratories of the middle ages where sages pursued their researches deep into the night, patiently awaiting the happy moment (but a moment which never came) when the philosopher's stone should appear in precipitation at the bottom of a crucible, or the elixir of life should distil drop by drop from the lips of a retort.

Jocelyn was so struck by the appearance of this chamber that he forgot for the moment his appointment with Mrs. Roberts and all the other circumstances which had so recently been paramount in his mind. Indeed, he felt a strong inclination to open that massive volume and examine its contents, but the next instant he blushed with very shame at the bare idea of thus penetrating into the secrets which pertained to Doctor Maravelli, if secrets they indeed were.

But as he stood in the middle of that room, gazing around by the light of the candle which he held in his hand, he became aware of a powerful odour of spices which gradually stole upon his senses, and this was mingled with another smell, of a far different character, and which seemed to be that of death. It was strange how these two odours struck simultaneously, and yet so distinctly and differently, upon the olfactory nerve, but so it was, and the notion of something embalmed speedily forced itself upon Jocelyn's imagination.

It was now quite mechanically, indeed, altogether in an unpremeditated way, that Loftus opened one of the cupboard doors which stood ajar. But, heavens! how sudden and convulsive was the start which he gave as two rows of human heads bristled up before his view. Yes, there they were, two ranges of human heads, looking out at him with fixed and glassy gaze from the recesses of that cupboard. But our hero's terror was only momentary. Hideous and shocking as the spectacle might be, he was not a child to be terrified by it; he recoiled in horror, but he trembled not with alarm. On the contrary, he now inspected those heads more closely, and he found that, being embalmed, they were, as he suspected, the sources of the blended odours which had struck so powerfully on his sense. But he also observed that the shaven crowns were delicately marked with a number of lines, dividing the surface of the cranium into several sections, each section being distinguished by a figure. In-

side the cupboard door was pasted a paper of references, and Jocelyn speedily understood that the use of those embalmed heads was for the study of phrenology or craniology, in pursuance of the systems of Gall and Spurzheim, at that time engaging the attention of many learned and scientific men in Europe.

A person of Jocelyn's good sense could not, of course, feel any antipathy toward Doctor Maravelli for having in his possession these accessories to a most interesting study. On the contrary, his good opinion of the physician as an intellectual man was considerably enhanced, and again did he long to peer into that book which was so well secured with the great brazen clasps. But no, he would not thus violate the sanctity of a volume which might be in manuscript and not in print, and therefore doubly sacred. Indeed, he began to feel that he was guilty of an offence in even lingering in this chamber upon the mysteries of which he had intruded. But then, he had not found the door locked, and it was therefore evident, or at least might be presumed, that Doctor Maravelli did not consider the place as the depository of any important secrets, however well furnished it might be with curiosities.

Issuing forth from this chamber and closing the door carefully behind him, Jocelyn proceeded to the other door facing the passage, and without hesitation he at once tried it. It opened, revealing an inner door covered with scarlet cloth. This our hero likewise pushed open, and now he found himself in a drawing-room where a lamp was burning upon the table, and Mrs. Roberts was pacing to and fro, apparently in a very agitated manner.

" Pardon me, madam, I am afraid I have kept you waiting," said Jocelyn, as, closing the two doors, he advanced into the spacious room, which, though well furnished, partook of that same sombre aspect that characterized the entire establishment. " The truth is, I mistook the apartment. Not perceiving a light glimmering through the keyhole or underneath the door — "

" Because of this inner door," observed the lady. " I forgot to tell you, in the hurry of our discourse ere now, which door it was at the end of the passage that communicated with the drawing-room. The other, I believe, is the doctor's lumber-room, for his chemical apparatus. I once

peeped in, but not liking the appearance, did not cross the threshold."

"For my own part," observed Jocelyn, "I cannot help wondering that you find courage enough to live in this gloomy abode."

"Courage, indeed!" said Mrs. Roberts, bitterly, "had you not a pretty specimen of my cowardice this evening?"

"Pardon me for making an observation so indiscreet, so improper," interrupted Jocelyn. "Believe me, madam, I would not for the world aggravate your sorrow. It is, beyond doubt, already too great for you to endure. No, not for worlds would I enhance it," he added, with that generous vehemence which showed that the assurance came gushing up from the recesses of his heart.

"I believe you, I believe you, Mr. Loftus," said the lady, extending her hand toward him. Then, with a peculiar smile suddenly appearing upon her countenance, she said, "I suppose that I am to call you Mr. Loftus?"

"Yes, if you please," was the quick response. "That other name, I believe that I have renounced it for ever — But no matter, I await in anxiety any explanations you may have to give me."

"Mr. Loftus," resumed the lady, motioning him to take a seat, and placing herself in a chair at a little distance from the one which he took, "in the first place, I must speak about myself. After what has occurred this evening you have a right to know something about me. Nay, do not interrupt me; I know full well what you would say. You would tell me that the service you have rendered me forms not in your estimation any claim upon my confidence. But I think otherwise. At all events, I feel as if Heaven itself threw you in my way. I cannot fancy that it was a mere accident, one of the common incidents of life, which thus brought us together. I therefore feel a desire, so to speak, a craving, a longing, to tell you somewhat of my own history. It seems to me as if it would be a solace and a consolation thus to unburden myself partially to you. Nor will there be anything indiscreet or improper in this, for although you are so young a man, and I am not so very much farther advanced in years," she observed, with a melancholy smile, "yet do circumstances cause us to stand in the light of friends, so that the confidence which I may impart and you receive

will be such as a sister may communicate to a brother. Tell me, then, Mr. Loftus, tell me," she added, in a tone and with a look of the most mournful entreaty, indeed, of pathetic supplication, " will you permit me to speak of my sorrows and of my wrongs in your hearing? "

" Assuredly, most assuredly, if it will in the slightest degree soothe your afflictions," and as Jocelyn thus spoke, he surveyed with a boundless compassion that lady who thus plaintively addressed him.

" And yet mine is but a common history, after all," she exclaimed, starting from her seat in a state of considerable excitement. " It is the usual history of woman, — that is to say, of the woman who is weak enough and foolish enough to forget her duty and place confidence in the protestations of deceitful man. Oh, Mr. Loftus, such has been my case. I have already told you that the name which I bear beneath this roof is a false one; I shall not now tell you what my real one is. On a future occasion perhaps I may do so, or accident may reveal it to you. But no matter. You see that I am a lady by education, and I trust in manners. Such indeed is my social rank, such also is my title in our own native land. I have been married, but am a widow. In an evil hour I listened to the tale of love which a nobleman, handsome, elegant, and fascinating, breathed in my ears. He was married, and I therefore knew that he could not love me honourably. But, oh, Mr. Loftus, I listened to the dictates of my heart in preference to those of reason. In the tide of passion all prudence and propriety were swallowed up. Several strange and romantic circumstances combined to precipitate my fall. But on these I need not dwell. Suffice it to say that I did fall, and that no sooner had I surrendered myself to him who vowed that he loved me, than he abruptly and precipitately quitted England. It is true that he sent me a note protesting his sorrow and anguish at this departure, which, as he alleged, an imperious necessity enforced, but he therein declared that he knew not how long his absence might last, certainly for some weeks, perhaps for many months. Altogether, the style was so laconic, so strange, and so unsatisfactory, if not positively chilling, that I was filled with despair. I saw that I had been cheated, deluded, deceived, by a base profligate, that I had been treated as one of those unfortunate creatures

whom men take as the companions of a transitory enjoyment and fleeting pleasure."

As she thus spoke in accents full of concentrated bitterness, the unfortunate lady covered her face with her hands, and the next moment Jocelyn could perceive the tears trickling between her fingers. He sympathized deeply with her, but what could he say, what could he do to console her? Hers was a grief which admitted of no solace from human lips, but if consolation could be offered to her at all, it must be from one of her own sex, between whom and herself the circumstances of etiquette and propriety interposed no formal barrier.

"On receiving that note," the lady at length resumed, having hastily wiped away her tears, "I was overwhelmed with despair. But reflection showed me that if I had thus been made the dupe of a heartless debauchee, I should at least strive to conceal my dishonour from the world. To give way to utter despondency or frantic grief would only be to excite suspicion, which might lead on to exposure. I accordingly resolved to cherish my wrong in secret. But here I must suddenly digress for the purpose of informing you that it was at this very time I had an opportunity of hearing her Royal Highness, the Princess Charlotte of Wales, speak of you to her aunt the Princess Sophia. No matter under what circumstances I thus became an ear-witness to the discourse of those royal ladies. Suffice it to say that as they spoke somewhat unguardedly in my presence, enough fell from their lips, ere they recollected themselves, to make me acquainted with many particulars concerning yourself. If you wish me to tell you the exact truth, I must observe that the princesses spoke of you in the most enthusiastic terms, praising your chivalrous character, dwelling with grateful admiration on the enterprise in which you had embarked, and deploring the previous misfortunes and calamities in which you had been involved when imprisoned in Paris. Thus was it that the discourse of the two princesses not only revealed to my ears who you really were, but also impressed me with the highest opinion of your merits. Can you therefore wonder if I ere now spoke so confidently concerning your honour as an English gentleman, when recommending Doctor Maravelli to receive you as a lodger beneath his roof?"

"I thank you, madam," said Jocelyn, "for the flattering terms in which you speak of me. As for the object of my present visit to the city of Geneva, it is dictated by the illimitable compassion I experience for a much injured princess."

"Yes, I am no stranger," continued the lady, "to the mission which you have undertaken in respect to the unfortunate wife of the prince regent. I am likewise acquainted with the fact that you are the bearer of a letter from the Princess Sophia to her Royal Highness. But I am at a loss to understand," she suddenly exclaimed, "how it is that having quitted England in December on this mission, you are only now about to accomplish it, and yet it's the month of May."

"I have suffered fresh imprisonment and persecution in France," returned Loftus. "But on these heads I will give you full details anon. Meantime, madam, may I request you to proceed with your own history?"

"I now then take up the thread of the sorrowful narrative which regards myself," said Mrs. Roberts. "The abrupt departure of my noble lover, his disgraceful abandonment of me within a few hours after I had given him the last and fondest proof of affection which it is in woman's power to bestow, was not the only calamity that my weakness and folly had entailed upon me. While I was endeavouring by the assumption of a calm demeanour to veil the sense of dishonour and of wrong that gnawed at my heart's core, the tongue of scandal was busy with my name. Insidious whisperings were circulated relative to me, and certain particulars, wherein the ludicrous was strangely blended with the romantic, were rumoured relative to my amour. It now became necessary for me to withdraw from the sphere wherein I had been accustomed to move, for, alas! my reputation was undermined, even if it were not altogether destroyed. When a frail and erring woman, Mr. Loftus, is placed under the ban of society, it is not her guilt that is punished, but her want of cunning and tact in concealing it. The Spartan children in ancient times were not chastised for stealing, but for their clumsiness in not being able to conceal their thefts, and thus is it with regard to the frailty of ladies in fashionable life. But I will not pause to moralize upon the point, nor do I seek in what I have said a justifi-

cation or an excuse for my own errors. No, I have fallen, and I am punished for my fall. Forced to withdraw, as I have said, from the sphere wherein I had been accustomed to move, I came upon the Continent. This was in January last, and I took up my abode in Paris, where for some weeks I dwelt in seclusion. A faithful female friend in London, with whom I corresponded, informed me from time to time that my noble lover — should I not rather say destroyer of my peace? — was reported to be still upon the Continent. Suddenly an idea struck me, and I marvelled that it had not entered my mind before. What if I were to seek him, endeavour to bring him back to my arms, make him atone for the wrong he had done me by the present tenderness and future constancy of his behaviour toward me? I longed to seek him for this purpose. But my pride stood in the way. As a woman I had been wronged, as a woman I craved for revenge. Revenge? no, not if he would love me still. A few more weeks passed, and at length I found — oh, how can I confess the humiliating truth to you, Mr. Loftus? But still it must be told, and that truth is, I became painfully aware that my dishonour would bear its fruit, that I was in the way to become a mother."

Mrs. Roberts averted her head while she made this avowal in low and tremulous accents; then, with a profound sigh, she became suddenly silent. Jocelyn felt all the awkwardness of their relative position, — he, a young man, alone at that midnight hour with her, a young woman, and she making these strange and painful revealings to his ears, while he experienced for her a sympathy and a compassion to which, however, he knew not how to give expression. For when a woman, young and handsome, is not only frail, but makes an avowal of her frailty, the words of sympathy which a generous-hearted young man, himself young and handsome, would utter might so easily be construed into advances of a tender and improper character. It might even be supposed that he was taking advantage of that very weakness which the frail one avowed, in order to obtain the gratification of his own selfish desires. Jocelyn, noble-hearted as he was generous and high-minded, was nevertheless man of the world enough to appreciate alike the delicacy and the awkwardness of his position, in the light which we have just been pointing it out. Thus was it that he forbore from

giving expression to the sympathy which he in reality experienced toward this wronged and afflicted lady.

" When I could no longer conceal from myself this truth which I have just avowed," she proceeded, at length, but still with half-averted countenance, on which the blood mantled and then fled as abruptly again beneath the olive hue of her complexion, " I resolved to seek him who is the father of the babe which I bear in my bosom. All hesitation vanished; my mind was made up. Thinking no more of revenge, but only of love and tenderness, I took my departure from Paris. This was in the beginning of March, and I proceeded into Germany. Being rich, Mr. Loftus, although you find me living in this close seclusion now, I had ample means to enable me to prosecute the search which I had undertaken. It was a search after a lover, and I had resolved, if I succeeded in finding him, I would say, ' Return not to your own home in England; renounce it, abandon it, for my sake. Was it not your own proposition at the time of my fall that I should dare public opinion to become your mistress openly? Now, then, do I call upon you to accept me in that light. It will cost you no pang to desert a wife whom you do not love for a mistress whom you have declared you adore. And, behold! I will place my fortune at your feet; all that I possess shall be yours. There is no sacrifice that I am not prepared to make for you, so that when my as yet unborn infant comes into the world it may at least be received in the arms of a father.' In the hope of finding him to whom I might thus address myself, did I travel throughout Germany, but I could obtain no trace of him. I passed into Italy. It was now the beginning of April, and at Milan I succeeded in hearing tidings of an individual exactly answering his description, but passing under a false name. Several months, I learned, had elapsed since he was there, and on prosecuting my inquiries I discovered, beyond all possibility of mistake, that he was sedulously pursuing a rival with his addresses. Yes, he had been seen by domestics belonging to the hotel at which he resided — But wherefore need I enter into these particulars? Suffice it to say that I obtained the fullest proof of his infidelity, but, following up the clue, I came on to Geneva. A fortnight only has elapsed since I arrived in this city, where, if additional evidence were wanting I discovered enough to convince me that instead of

abandoning myself to dreams of hope and love, 'tis for me to think either of despair or of vengeance. The unsettled state of France and Germany, in consequence of the return of Napoleon from Elba, has determined me to fix my abode for the present at Geneva. Here at least does tranquillity continue, and it does not appear probable that the peace of the little republic will be disturbed, no matter what turn events may take in the north of Europe. I must inform you that on arriving at Geneva a fortnight ago, and on discovering those additional proofs of my noble lover's infidelity to which I have alluded, I was seized with so sudden and alarming an illness that it became necessary to summon medical aid. Doctor Maravelli was sent for, and of course he perceived my condition. To him did I make known my intention of remaining at Geneva, and I revealed to him enough of my history to enable him to understand that I sought seclusion for a few months while passing through the crowning ordeal of my disgrace. Accident had thus thrown me in the way of the very man who could provide me with the accommodation I required, for it appears that the doctor's house is one of retirement for ladies to whom such temporary seclusion becomes a matter of convenience or necessity. His chief patronesses, or, rather, patients, are foreign ladies who come hither from different parts, and even from distant quarters of Europe, to conceal their shame and endure its consequences beneath his roof. Now may you understand, Mr. Loftus, wherefore you find me in such a place. You can likewise comprehend why the doctor appealed to me for my consent ere he departed from the usual routine of his household arrangements by receiving you as a lodger. Had there been other ladies dwelling here at the present time, he would not perhaps have offered thus to accommodate you, but I am at this moment the only unhappy being of my sex located under such circumstances within these gloomy walls."

Again Mrs. Roberts paused, and for upwards of a minute she preserved a deep silence, broken only by the sighs which convulsed her bosom.

" With regard to that incident, that dreadful incident," she resumed, " which made us acquainted this evening, and has rendered me indebted to you for my life, that most wretched life which you so nobly rescued, oh, it was in a

sudden paroxysm of despair that I sought death in the deep waters of Lake Leman. I had rambled forth to escape from the fearful dulness and awful monotony of this house, and while roving on the shores of Geneva's inland sea, I fell into a train of meditation more harrowing, more goading, more poignant than any to which I had lately yielded. I thought of what I once was and what I now am, how but a few months back I occupied an honourable, almost a brilliant position, and how I am now a lonely, friendless sojourner in a foreign clime. I thought of my wrongs, how much I had loved that man, how cruelly I had been deceived. But, worst of all, I reflected that in a few months more I should give birth to a child on whom I could bestow no mother's fostering care, but whom, if it lived, I should have to abandon to the care of strangers, and that amongst those strangers must it be reared, never to know a parent's fondness nor endearing love. Oh, Mr. Loftus, naturally do I possess a good heart, a kind, loving, and affectionate disposition, and it was not, therefore, without emotion that I could contemplate the necessity of tearing myself away from the child who in a short time will see the light. It was this reflection that drove me to despair. Madness was in my brain, I felt as if I myself were an outcast, and that a curse would be entailed upon the head of my child if I suffered it to come into the world. Frantic, frenzied, banished, as it were, by the horror of my thoughts from the realms of hope, I resolved to put an end to my own wretched existence and terminate that of my yet unborn babe at the same time. But mine hour was not yet come. Providence interposed to save me, and you, my generous deliverer, were made the instrument of Heaven's merciful and inscrutable purpose."

The lady ceased, and, covering her face with her hands, again she wept, and again was there a long interval of silence.

"You are now acquainted with as much as it is needful for you to know of my sad history," she said, at length breaking silence after a much longer pause than any previous one. "I would offer to assist you in the generous enterprise which you have in view, but I know not whether there be any way in which I can forward your aims."

Jocelyn, after thanking Mrs. Roberts for the proffer of assistance which she had just given, proceeded to describe in a brief manner the circumstances of his late imprison-

ment, thus accounting for the long delay which had occurred since he set out from England on his present mission, and without mentioning any names, he observed that the princess was so surrounded by secret enemies and spies that he knew not how to obtain access to her.

"Can you not boldly present yourself at the villa to-morrow," asked Mrs. Roberts, "and demand an interview with her Royal Highness?"

"There are certain ladies in her household," returned Jocelyn, "who would hesitate at no means, however desperate, base, or unprincipled, in order to prevent me from obtaining access to her Royal Highness."

"Who are those ladies?" inquired Mrs. Roberts, hastily, and as if prompted by a particular motive.

"Their name is Owen, and there are three sisters," was the response.

"Detested name!" ejaculated Mrs. Roberts. Then, in a different tone, she added, "I have every reason to believe that one of those young ladies of whom you have spoken is no very estimable pattern of morality and virtue, though Heaven knows it is not for me to cast the first stone at her. But I should inform you, unless, indeed, you know it already, that the strangest, the most startling, indeed, the most astounding rumours are prevalent in Geneva relative to her Royal Highness."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Loftus. Then, as a sudden recollection struck him, he said, "I remember how peculiar and how mysterious was Maravelli's manner when I spoke to him on this same point at the village inn where we dined together this afternoon."

"Doctor Maravelli is acquainted with something relative to the villa, of a dark and mysterious character," observed Mrs. Roberts. "He has once or twice inadvertently let fall a hint to this effect, and although naturally a very cautious man, yet has he so far committed himself on one or two occasions as to suffer me to perceive that he could reveal some startling secret if he chose."

"But concerning whom, and of what nature is that secret?" asked Loftus, eagerly.

"Ah! that I cannot say. Doctor Maravelli has never entered into particulars, has never even manifested the slightest approach toward making me his confidante.

Besides," added the lady, with dignity, " I should not think of encouraging a confidence calculated to place us on so familiar and intimate a footing. No, he has merely let slip a word or two in an unguarded moment, but enough, I repeat, to make me aware that he is acquainted with some secret which he could reveal if he chose."

" But the reports relative to the princess," said Jocelyn, inquiringly, " what is their nature? "

" All kinds of incredible things," replied Mrs. Roberts. " Indeed, I would not repeat them were it not absolutely necessary that you should know all that is said concerning her, and were it not also that you would be enabled to glean these things from other sources, for they are on the tip of every tongue, and scandal is busy enough with the princess's name. In a word, 'tis said that she not only intrigues openly and unblushingly with her equerry Bergami, but that she scruples not to receive other lovers inside the walls of the villa; ay, and 'tis added, too, that she has even given birth to a child."

" Heavens! is this possible? " exclaimed Jocelyn, starting with mingled amazement and indignation. " What am I to think? Have I indeed embarked in the cause of a shameless wanton, and thus laid myself open to become the laughing-stock of the whole world, or is slander doing its detestable work? "

" Firmly and sincerely do I believe in the latter hypothesis," returned Mrs. Roberts. " Nevertheless, the whole affair is full of mystery. That one of the young ladies bearing the name of Owen has admitted a lover " — and here the lady sighed deeply — " within the precincts of the villa, I have every reason to believe; and that therefore such conduct is but too well calculated to bring scandal upon that dwelling, a scandal, indeed, which by misapprehension and mistake may attach itself to the princess herself, while it is all along only one of her dependents who is to blame — "

" Good God! " ejaculated Loftus, starting from his seat as if a flash of lightning suddenly thrilled through him from head to foot, " I understand it all. 'Tis the diabolical working-out of the conspiracy. Yes, yes, the truth stands revealed before me plain and transparent as it possibly can be. Madam," he abruptly exclaimed, turning toward

Mrs. Roberts, " the construction you have so charitably placed upon the matter is the right one, and I solemnly assure you that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales is innocent of all and everything that scandal may impute unto her."

Mrs. Roberts gazed upon our hero with mingled astonishment and delight. Indeed, she forgot her own wrongs and her own sorrows in her joy to think that the injured wife of the prince regent not only possessed a champion who embraced her cause so fervently, but who was enabled to vindicate her character so confidently.

" Madam," said Loftus, observing the manner with which she surveyed him, " you have to a certain extent imparted your afflictions to me, and I will in return make known certain secrets to you. You have heard me speak of a conspiracy. I will explain what I mean, for I believe, from certain things which you have said, that you can assist me in the task I have in hand, and I feel assured that you possess the inclination to do so."

Jocelyn then proceeded to reveal all that he knew concerning the conspiracy on foot against the princess, and of which the three Misses Owen were the instruments. Mrs. Roberts listened with surprise and indignation, but when our hero had concluded, she said, with a peculiar emphasis, " After all, I am not astonished to hear that the Queen of England is one of the prime movers of this diabolical wickedness. I have all along suspected that she was capable of any treachery, any cruelty — "

But here Mrs. Roberts checked herself, and Loftus had too much delicacy to put any questions to her as to the opportunities she might have had of judging so minutely relative to the secret disposition of old Queen Charlotte.

For half an hour longer did the conversation last between Jocelyn and the lady, and it was past one o'clock when they quitted the drawing-room to return to their respective chambers.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DOCTOR'S SECRET

On the following morning Mrs. Roberts took her breakfast in her own room, she being much exhausted with the incidents of the preceding evening, and also on account of the late hour to which she had sat up. Loftus and Doctor Maravelli were accordingly alone together at table, and when the meal was over, our hero said to the physician, "I wish to have some conversation with you on a subject of a very delicate nature and of the utmost importance."

"With much pleasure," said the doctor, evidently not altogether unprepared for this intimation, especially after the hint which he had given Loftus on the preceding evening, to the effect that if he could be of any service to him his aid should be cheerfully afforded. "Come with me into my sanctum, where we can talk at greater ease, because secure against interruption."

He thereupon led the way into that little parlour which has been before described as fitted up in a manner so sombre as to wear quite a funereal appearance.

"Now, Doctor Maravelli," said Jocelyn, "I wish to treat you as a man of the world, and therefore I will at once frankly and candidly inform you that I believe you have it in your power to render me a service for which I am able and willing to pay handsomely. You must not imagine that because I am travelling humbly, unattended, and without any circumstance of pomp or show, that I am limited in my means, for even if my own resources did not enable me to do what is necessary in the carrying out of my plans, I should not find much difficulty in obtaining from other quarters the supplies needful for the purpose."

"And what is this service that you think I can render

you? " asked Maravelli, inwardly chuckling at the preface with which our hero had introduced his business, and which seemed to promise large gains for the unprincipled physician.

" In your capacity, doctor," resumed Loftus, who saw in the twinkling of Maravelli's eye the lurking devil which personifies the love of gold in the heart of man, " you must frequently be called upon to exercise your professional skill under circumstances of great secrecy, and no doubt in proportion to the importance of the secret is the fee placed in your hands? "

" I believe that all professional men are occasionally placed in such circumstances," remarked the doctor, with a mysterious look.

" But you especially, within the walls of Geneva," said Jocelyn, " considering that you have this spacious establishment fitted up expressly for the accommodation of ladies who seek temporary retirement. The circumstance bespeaks you to be a man in whom confidence is placed, and therefore if ever there be a secret which can be hushed up at home, without the frail one being compelled to seclude herself for awhile within these walls, you doubtless, of all the medical men in Geneva, are the one to be confided in under such circumstances? "

" You seem to understand my repute and my business well," said Maravelli, with a smile of still deeper meaning than before. " Now, there is something uppermost in your mind, to which all this is but a mere preface. Speak candidly at once. I think that we shall soon understand each other."

" Then, in plain terms," said Jocelyn, " if you will tell me what is the best-paid secret which has recently been entrusted to you, I will give you double or treble the amount for the revelation."

" Gently," said the doctor. " Again I may observe that I think we shall understand each other, but for me to reveal to you any secret at random will not do. I have several secrets, secrets regarding the happiness and deeply compromising the honour of divers noble families, Genevese, German, French, Italian, English, all which secrets are now locked up in my breast, and the very one which I may consider most important might not be that which has the same value in your eyes. Besides, you are not asking through

mere curiosity; you have a motive, and consequently there is one particular secret which you wish to know. Give me a clue."

"Did not our conversation yesterday afford you any insight with regard to my business at Geneva?" asked Jocelyn.

"Candidly speaking," replied Maravelli, "methought that you were somewhat pressing in your queries in regard to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales."

"Yes, and methought that you were likewise somewhat mysterious, I may say even peculiar, in the answers that you gave me."

"In what manner?" asked Maravelli.

"You surely can recollect what took place between us," rejoined Jocelyn. "You have spoken, as you informed me, on one occasion to two of the young ladies bearing the name of Owen; you also left upon my mind the impression that you had been within the walls of the villa; and your look intimated as plainly as the most eloquent looks are able that you could state something if you chose which would soon put to flight all the elevated notions which I might have formed relative to the honour of the Princess of Wales. Tell me, did I read aright what was passing in your mind?"

"Yes, to a certain extent," answered Maravelli, but hesitatingly and guardedly.

"Now, it is my habit," resumed Jocelyn, "when having any particular clue to follow up through paths enveloped in gloom and beset with doubts and mysteries, to observe the minutest circumstances that may assist my investigation; or, in plainer terms, by putting two and two together I seldom fail at arriving at an accurate conclusion. Now that you, Doctor Maravelli, are acquainted with some secret connected with the villa where the princess resides, I am convinced. Then, when I find rumour declaring in bold and unmistakable terms that her Royal Highness has been guilty of great profligacies, and even privately given birth to a child, I ask myself, who could confirm this tale if not Doctor Maravelli?"

Jocelyn looked steadily in the physician's face as he thus spoke, and again did he perceive that sinister twinkling in the eyes of the Genevese which denoted the heart's lust for

gold. This very look at once served as a hint, although it was in reality the natural peeping forth of the man's character rather than an intentional development of it on his part. Jocelyn, however, at once profited thereby, and producing a pocketbook, he counted down Piedmont bank-notes to the value of two hundred louis d'or.

"You will not be offended with me, sir," he remarked, endeavouring to do the business in as delicate a way as possible, "if I offer this earnest of my liberal intentions toward you."

"I cannot feel offended, no, I cannot possibly be angry at such generosity," mumbled the physician. "But, I ought not, really I ought not — that is, I don't think — But, however, I suppose that we do understand each other now," and thus speaking, the physician consigned the bank-notes to his pocket, with the evident lust of one who is satisfying the strong craving of an insatiate passion. "That is just double the fee that I received from Mrs. Ranger," he thought within himself. Then, fixing his eyes upon Jocelyn, he said, "It is indeed too true that her Royal Highness the English princess became a mother a short time ago, barely three weeks, for I myself brought her child, which was still-born, into the world."

Loftus was staggered, and for a moment he certainly lost all faith in the possibility of the princess's virtue, for this intelligence on the doctor's part was given with an assurance, a sincerity, and a solemnity that put his truthfulness almost beyond a doubt. But still Jocelyn had resolved to sift the matter to the very bottom, and, veiling his emotions accordingly, he said, "Will you now explain to me all the circumstances under which this startling occurrence took place?"

Maravelli accordingly narrated to our hero those circumstances which are already known to the reader: how his services had been secured in advance by a liberal payment, how, when the night came, he had been conducted blindfolded to the place, how he was led up into a room where a lamp burned dimly and feebly, draperies were carefully drawn over the window and around the bed, and his patient's head was completely enveloped in the folds of a thick black veil, how he had delivered this female of a still-born child, and how two young ladies, whom he had since recognized

as two of the Misses Owen, had saluted the patient as "dearest and beloved princess." He likewise added how, on issuing forth again, he had been left in the garden by Mrs. Ranger, and how he had heard the tread of footsteps, the sounds of voices, and the galloping off of a post-chaise, which, filling him with terror, made him scale the wall and speed back to his own house.

"Then I am to understand, Doctor Maravelli," said Jocelyn, "that you raised the bandage and took a peep about the room to which you were so mysteriously introduced?"

"It is as you say," answered the physician. "Human nature could not have remained proof against such a temptation to gratify one's curiosity under such peculiar circumstances."

"But you did not all along obtain the slightest glimpse of the countenance of the lady occupying the bed, your patient, in a word?"

"No, I beheld not her countenance," was the reply.

"But you are sure that the two young ladies who entered and saluted her as the princess were two of the Misses Owen?"

"Yes, I am certain of it. From beneath the bandage I observed them sufficiently to know them again, and since then I have seen them walking upon the banks of the lake in attendance upon the princess. I have even had the curiosity to ascertain their Christian names, and found that they were Miss Emma and Miss Julia."

"Well, and you also discovered that the female who managed all this mysterious business was a certain Mrs. Ranger?"

"Yes," returned Maravelli. "Her also did I observe in the room, and if you see her once it would be impossible not to know her again."

"One question more," said Jocelyn. "After all the precautions which were taken, or seemed to be taken, to prevent you from ascertaining that it was the princess's villa, you were nevertheless suffered, when issuing forth again, to quit the garden by yourself? In plain terms, Mrs. Ranger left you, on the plea of looking after another woman to whom she had entrusted the dead child, and thus you were left alone to discover where it was you really were?"

"Yes," observed Maravelli. "But that part of the business belonged, as it were, to another adventure."

"And that other adventure?" said Jocelyn, inquiringly. "Be pleased to tell me everything connected with the incidents of that night. In proportion to your candour shall my liberality be measured."

"I can really tell you little enough that is satisfactory on this head," replied Maravelli. "But listen attentively, Mr. Loftus. You must know that, being wedded to science, I from time to time purchase any human fish which two or three rogues belonging to the city hook up from the lake. I may add that I possess a sort of agency to supply certain German universities with heads for phrenological study, real heads, you must understand, and not chalk ones, but heads which I embalm according to a valuable secret of my own. Well, Mr. Loftus — But I see you are looking at me with a strange expression."

"Pray pardon me, and proceed," said our hero, who indeed had looked confused on being spoken to relative to those very heads whereof he had seen several specimens in the doctor's private room during the previous night.

"Well, I merely mentioned those little facts," continued Maravelli, "in order to explain how it happens that I have any acquaintance at all with three such villainous ruffians as Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden, for those are the fishers of men to whom I alluded, and they are likewise fellows ever ready to do whatsoever service is well paid, no matter for its nature. These men, then, it appears from what they have since told me during a conversation I had with them, were hired by two English gentlemen named Smith and Thompson to carry off a couple of ladies from the villa on the very night of which I have been speaking, and that same night, you understand, on which my services were put in requisition. But it would appear that Kobolt and his comrades carried off the wrong females, — indeed, none others than Mrs. Ranger and the very woman having charge of the dead child. Hence the sudden disappearance of Mrs. Ranger when she left me in the garden in the manner I have described. The two Englishmen, it appears, had gone to Lausanne, and there a ludicrous scene took place when the two elderly dames were brought into their presence."

"But how know you that the other woman taken with

Mrs. Ranger was the one to whom the child had been entrusted? Because those men — Kobolt, and the others of whom you speak — could not have known all this."

"No, assuredly not," returned Maravelli, "but Mrs. Ranger called upon me a few evenings after the incidents that had taken place, and hinted to me what had occurred on the memorable occasion in question. She said that as now I of course knew it was the princess's villa to which I had been taken, she had only to add her prayers and entreaties to any other inducement which I had already received to keep the secret, as I must now be more than ever aware of its immense importance."

"Did Mrs. Ranger happen to mention the name of that woman of whom you have been speaking?" asked Jocelyn.

"Yes, she said it was Hubbard, Mrs. Hubbard, the laundress in the household of her Royal Highness."

"And the two Englishmen who called themselves Smith and Thompson?" said Jocelyn, more than half-suspecting that these very convenient names were only assumed ones, but by whom and for what purpose he of course could not imagine. "Did you ever see them?"

"Not to my knowledge," returned Maravelli.

"And about the still-born child," asked Jocelyn, "what became of it?"

"Ah! that question reminds me," exclaimed the doctor, "that there is another little incident growing out of the adventures of that night, an incident which has come to my knowledge by a side-wind, and which may probably account for the manner wherein the infant corpse was disposed of."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Jocelyn, "your budget of information is even more capacious than I had expected. I am sure you have already given me two hundred louis' worth of intelligence. Here is another hundred louis, therefore, for what you are about to impart to me."

"Upon my word, you justify the opinion so invariably entertained relative to the generosity of Englishmen," said Maravelli, as he took up the bank-notes which Jocelyn had just counted down upon the table, and having consigned them to his pocket, he continued to observe, "Mr. Loftus, I am still speaking of the night of memorable incidents,

and here is another episode in that night's history. Behold, a young lady was arrested on the margin of the lake, between two and three o'clock in the morning, by a posse of police officers, who were lying in wait for the fishers of men, and who were suddenly alarmed by a splash in the water. The young lady was taken before the night-commissary, and to him she gave her name, Emma Owen. Her story was that she went out for a ramble, and that in a listless mood she flung a stone into the water. The magistrate ordered her to find bail. She accordingly sent for a linen-draper with whom she dealt, and he at once proceeded to the police station and entered into the required surety. He happens to be a cousin of mine, and hence my knowledge of the transaction. I now leave you to judge, Mr. Loftus, for yourself, what Miss Emma Owen was doing at the side of the lake within two or three hours after the accouchement, and what that splash was which attracted the notice of the police officers."

"Will you favour me with the name and address of this linen-draper?" asked Loftus.

"Heavens! I hope we are not going to have any exposure in all these things," exclaimed Maravelli, now evidently frightened. "Remember that according to the laws of Geneva, it is branding with a red-hot iron and ten years' imprisonment for any surgeon who privately and secretly assists in the accouchement of a woman, and who fails to have the birth, place, hour, and all particulars duly registered. Besides, even if the authorities, out of consideration for a lady of the princess's royal rank, should pass the matter over in silence, yet, were it merely whispered that I had in any way betrayed the confidence reposed in me, I should lose all the patronage whereby I live, and I might shut up my establishment at once."

"Doctor Maravelli," said Jocelyn, who had listened with the utmost attention to these remonstrances, "rest assured that you shall not suffer on account of all this. I cannot explain to you my motives in penetrating into the affair, but you may be certain that no harm shall befall you. Now, then, the linen-draper's name, and here is another hundred louis."

"Oh, you are too good, you are too generous," said Maravelli, no longer thinking of the danger which had ere

now alarmed him, but consigning the notes to his pocket. "Here is the name," and he wrote it down upon a piece of paper.

"Now, one word more," said Jocelyn.

"Stop!" exclaimed Maravelli, as something struck him. "Without compromising me in the least, you might ascertain all the particulars of this little episode relating to Miss Emma Owen. The night-commissary must have duly made an entry thereof in the police book, which you can inspect for a franc. The whole series of adventures happened about three weeks ago."

"Thanks for this additional information," said Jocelyn. "And now the one word more that I alluded to. Where, in case of need, can I find these men, Kobolt and his companions, of whom you have been speaking?"

"If any time after dark you walk on the shores of the lake, near the old jetty, you will be pretty sure to encounter three ill-looking fellows; or if you particularly wish to see them in a more private manner, I can tell you the tavern which they are in the habit of frequenting."

At this moment a knock was heard at the room door, and Mavolta entered with the announcement that the doctor's presence was immediately required at a hotel much frequented by foreign visitors, especially the English. He thereupon sallied forth, and Jocelyn proceeded to his own chamber, where he sat down to pen a letter to his Louisa, and also to reflect upon the course which he should now pursue in consequence of the many important revelations he had just received from Doctor Maravelli.

In this manner he whiled away the time till midday, when he repaired to the drawing-room, Mrs. Roberts having given him to understand on the preceding night that she would be there at that hour. Nor did she now fail to keep the appointment, and he accordingly found her seated upon the sofa in that apartment.

A dead pallor sat upon the olive hue of her skin, making her seem as if she had recently been very ill. She also looked languid and weak, and it was but too evident that she had sustained a severe shock from the immersion in the water and the excitement she had undergone, in her delicate situation, on the preceding evening. She endeavoured, however, to smile cheerfully as she gave our hero

her hand, but he could not help saying, " I am afraid you are very ill? "

" I do indeed feel more severely to-day than I did last night the effects of my rash and wicked attempt at self-destruction," answered Mrs. Roberts, " but I shall be better to-morrow. I promised you last night that I would repair to-day to the villa, and endeavour to obtain an interview with her Royal Highness, but I am afraid I must postpone this visit until to-morrow, when I shall no doubt be better. Indeed, unless you are very impatient, I can faithfully promise you that to-morrow your letter shall be delivered to her Royal Highness."

" I could not think of pressing you to undertake a task for which you are evidently so unfitted to-day," said Jocelyn.

He then proceeded to inform Mrs. Roberts how he had succeeded in worming out of Doctor Maravelli so many important secrets connected with the villa, but when he mentioned the names of Mr. Thompson and Mr. Smith as those of the two Englishmen who had hired Kobolt and his gang to carry off the two females to Lausanne, he noticed that Mrs. Roberts became much affected. She trembled violently and burst into tears. Then, remembering all she had said on the preceding night relative to her faithless lover and one of the Misses Owen, it instantaneously struck him that either Smith or Thompson was the feigned name under which that noble seducer of hers had travelled on the Continent.

" I see that you have divined what is passing in my thoughts," she said, gazing upon Jocelyn through her tears. " And now I can full well understand that it becomes important for you to ascertain all that you can relative to that intrigue between my faithless lover and Julia Owen."

" It is indeed of importance," said Jocelyn, " because from all that I told you last night it is probable that, faithful to the vile mission which they have received from the arch-conspirators in London, these Owens have managed to throw the guilt, the scandal, and the dishonour of their profligacy upon the princess. It is important, then, as you will see, madam, that I should glean every possible evidence to prove that profligacy on the part of either or all of those Misses Owen."

" You have nought to do, Mr. Loftus," said the lady,

" but repair to the town hall, examine the police book, and ascertain where the individual named Thompson lived when at Geneva. You can then follow up your inquiries at the place so indicated and perhaps you may glean much important information concerning him."

" And Mr. Smith the same?" said Jocelyn.

" Alas! I am in a position to tell you certain particulars relative to him," resumed the lady, with a profound sigh, " for he is the treacherous one of whom I have been speaking. Here, then, is the address of the lodging which he occupied when at Geneva. If you go to the house, you will be received by a young and beautiful girl, one of those models of true Genevese loveliness, but who, alas! is gradually becoming the mere wreck of her former self. That this sad change is taking place in her is but too evident, even to the eye of one who never saw her ere the blight of sorrow had fallen upon her cheeks. Did I not tell you last night," continued Mrs. Roberts, with a strong accentuation of bitterness, " that on pursuing my inquiries here, within the walls of Geneva, I learned enough to put to flight all dreams of love and hope, and make me think only of vengeance? For that treacherous one who scrupled not to make a moment's plaything and toy of me, and then tossed me ignominiously away, has done the same by this poor Genevese girl. Nay, his conduct has even been more flagitious toward her than in respect to myself, for I knew that he was married, and I fell, therefore, with my eyes open. Yes, mine was the guilt of sheer profligacy, and its punishment was merited. But that poor girl, placing full reliance upon the word of an Englishman, believed that he was unmarried; and little dreaming that he was of a lordly rank and so highly placed above her, she surrendered herself to his honour, but in the hope of becoming his wife. During the last month of his residence at Geneva, he was frequently absent from his lodging for the whole night, and though at first his excuses satisfied the girl, she at length grew jealous. So she followed him, kept a watch about the villa, and gleaned unmistakable proof that he was carrying on an intrigue with Miss Julia Owen. But still the poor Genevese girl said nothing to her seducer, for she was afraid of angering him, and she trembled lest he should seek some subterfuge for not fulfilling his pledge to her, — that pledge the fulfilment whereof she

stood so much in need to save her honour. But all on a sudden her seducer's precipitate departure from Geneva filled her with despair, and now, as I have ere now told you, Mr. Loftus, she is a sinking wreck, though still retaining all the evidences of remarkable beauty. But even in three weeks has affliction worked fearful inroads upon her. Ah! no wonder, for if my heart be nearly broken, experienced as I am in the ways of the world, what must be the feelings of this unhappy girl, so innocent, so full of gaiety and joy, until she became his prey!"

"Alas! poor girl!" said Jocelyn, deeply touched by this narrative. "You know my reasons for remaining indoors to-day, — indeed until the letter which I bear from England shall be safe in the hands of the princess?"

"You are afraid of being seen and recognized by any one attached to the household of her Royal Highness, the result of which knowledge of your presence in Geneva would only be to cause the multiplication of all imaginable precautions to ward off the approach of any friendly disposed person to the presence of the princess."

"Yes, those are the reasons which induce me to remain in the house to-day," said Jocelyn, "but to-night so soon as it is dusk, I will issue forth and institute the necessary inquiries relative to the individual who bore the name of Thompson."

"And you will also do well to call at the other lodging and see that poor girl," said Mrs. Roberts. "She may probably tell you even more than she told me concerning the villainy, the perfidy, and the profligacy of her seducer. But now that I bethink me," she suddenly exclaimed, "there can be no need for me to exhibit the slightest want of confidence toward you, since you have placed such full trust in me. I will therefore tell you my real name, likewise that of the perfidious nobleman who has been the author of my unhappiness and who under the name of Mr. Smith — "

But here Mrs. Roberts was interrupted by the entrance of Doctor Maravelli, who burst somewhat abruptly into the room, on his return from the visit to which he had been summoned.

"Now, my dear madam," he exclaimed, "you will have a companion at last. I thought it impossible that my establishment could remain much longer with only one

lady lodger. Another will be here presently, recommended to me also from the very same hotel where I had the honour of first forming your acquaintance. I have explained to her that I have a gentleman lodging in my house," added the doctor, turning toward Loftus as he thus spoke, "and she has made no objection."

"I am glad for your sake, madam," said our hero, addressing himself to Mrs. Roberts, "that you will thus have a companion."

"And a very agreeable one, too, I fancy," cried Doctor Maravelli. "She is a fellow countrywoman of yours, a thorough lady, beautiful in person, fascinating in manners, and with one of the sweetest voices I ever heard in my life."

"At all events, you are drawing a charming picture, doctor," said Mrs. Roberts, forcing herself to smile, for she never chose to appear too unhappy in Maravelli's presence.

"Perhaps you will have the kindness, my dear madam," continued the doctor, "to receive the lady when she comes. I think it always better that a stranger should be met in the first instance by one of her own sex, and that they should also be left alone together for a few hours, so that they may become well acquainted and get on a friendly kind of footing with each other. Perhaps, therefore, madam," he added, "you and Mrs. Montague — for that is the name the lady chooses to be known by — will pass the remainder of the day alone together in the drawing-room, while Mr. Loftus and I take our dinner and wine *tête-à-tête*, as we did yesterday, at the village inn."

The suggestions of Doctor Maravelli were at once agreed to, and Jocelyn was accordingly prevented for the remainder of that day from finding an opportunity of renewing his private conversation with Mrs. Roberts. The interval till dinner-time he passed in his own chamber, reading some books which the doctor lent him; and when at five in the evening he was summoned to the dining-room, he learned from the physician that Mrs. Montague had duly arrived, accompanied by her lady's-maid, in the course of the afternoon, and that she was with Mrs. Roberts in the drawing-room.

Loftus sat an hour with the doctor at table, and then returned to his books to while away another three hours until it was dusk. This was at about nine o'clock, at which hour

he issued forth from Doctor Maravelli's establishment, to institute certain inquiries necessary for the carrying out of his mission with regard to the Princess of Wales.

In the meantime, and very shortly after Jocelyn had left Mrs. Roberts in the drawing-room, in the forenoon, according to the suggestion of Doctor Maravelli, the new lodger, Mrs. Montague, arrived at the establishment and was received by the physician. She was accompanied by her lady's-maid, and was evidently of rank and distinction, as she was assuredly of great personal beauty. In none of these particulars had the doctor at all exaggerated.

Mavolta, being likewise in attendance, at once escorted Mrs. Montague to the drawing-room, but the moment she threw open the door and the eyes of the newcoming English lady encountered those of Mrs. Roberts, who had risen from her seat to receive her, each started with the suddenness of an amazed recognition. Mavolta did not observe what thus passed, but closing the door behind Mrs. Montague, left her and Mrs. Roberts alone together.

" Is it possible? " exclaimed one.

" And I also ask, is it possible? " cried the other.

Then there was a pause, a very awkward pause of upwards of a minute, during which the two ladies evidently knew not exactly what course to pursue toward each other. But at length Mrs. Roberts advanced, extending her hand, and saying, " We meet under circumstances that should quench all hostile feeling."

" Agreed," returned Mrs. Montague, and they shook hands accordingly.

But here we must leave them, for the present, to discuss their several grievances, compare notes of their plans, and, in a word, indulge in those reciprocal outpourings of confidence which were so natural with two females in their condition.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FISHERS OF MEN

Having engaged a fiacre, or vehicle answering in description to a London hackney-coach, Jocelyn proceeded in the first instance to the town hall, where he made inquiries relative to the lodging which a certain Mr. Thompson, an English gentleman, had occupied while recently sojourning in Geneva. It being what would be called in England "after office hours," our hero had to pay double fees for the search, to which he of course did not object, and in a few minutes the clerk in charge of the registry gave him a slip of paper containing the information which he required. But as he put the slip into Jocelyn's hand, the official asked, "Is this all you desire to know concerning Mr. Thompson?"

"I wish to ascertain all I can concerning him," replied Jocelyn, "and if you can give me any additional particulars, I shall most cheerfully and liberally remunerate you for your trouble."

Thus speaking, he laid two louis upon the table, and the clerk, after consigning them to his pocket, unlocked a cupboard, took out a bulky volume, and opening it at the letter T, searched for the name of Thompson.

"It appears to be a very common name with your fellow countrymen, sir," he remarked, with a smile, "for a large number of English visiting Geneva are called Thompson. I have observed, too, it is the same with Smith and Jones and Brown and Green and White, but I think that of all, the Smiths predominate."

"There is no doubt a great number of Englishmen bearing those names," said Loftus, "but it must also be observed that whenever an Englishman, no matter how fine a name his

real one may be, wishes to take a false one, he is sure to fix on the commonest and ugliest."

"Ah! indeed, is it so?" said the clerk, who, like all Genevese, was fond of a gossip. "Well, sometimes we find out that Englishmen visiting Geneva are travelling with false names, but so long as our attention is not openly and officially directed to the matter, we wink at it. The English, you see, sir, spend a great deal of money at Geneva. Their presence is good for our trade, and we like to encourage them here. They may therefore take what names they like, so long as they do not violate the laws. At the same time, I must inform you that all particulars we do succeed in gleaning concerning them we place on record, or else," he added, with a sly laugh, "we should not have such a police book as this to refer to when occasion may require. But, ah! here is the Thompson concerning whom you have been inquiring, the last Englishman of that name who has visited Geneva, and you will perceive that there is a pretty long note appended to his name."

Our hero looked at the place to which the official pointed and observed that there was indeed a lengthy annotation, consisting of such curt, broken, but very significant sentences as the following:

"Came from Italy — had been seen at Milan — supposed to be secretly following the English princess's retinue — is well provided with money — evidently has no political aim in view — has been recognized by an English traveller as a Colonel Malpas — said not to bear a very high character in his own country — lives secluded and retired here — shuns notice, avoids society, pays his way regularly — goes out at night — lurks about the English princess's villa — has been seen to scale the wall — was watched on two or three occasions — found to have passed the night within the villa — orders given not to molest him — no desire to create a scandal — departed suddenly — left no debts unpaid."

"And that is all," said the clerk, when he had read these notes over to our hero.

Loftus then requested to be favoured with any private information that the book might afford relative to a Mr. Smith who had also been recently staying at Geneva, and having paid another fee, he was allowed to inspect the following record:

"Came from Italy, through Savoy — supposed to be keeping on the track of the English princess and her retinue — is known to be an English nobleman of high rank, the Earl of Curzon — travelling with passport made out in name of Smith — believed to have no political aim or object — mere affair of gallantry — plenty of money — lives in closest seclusion — seen loitering near the villa — frequent appointments with some lady dwelling there — the police spy, set to watch, unable to discover who the lady is — dared not venture close enough — the earl observed to scale the garden wall — passed whole nights at the villa — opinion confirmed that it is a mere intrigue of gallantry — no notice to be taken — not to be interfered with — departed without leaving any debts."

Having ascertained these particulars, which, we should observe, were rendered as complete as possible by means of specific dates, Jocelyn Loftus took his departure from the town hall, and reëntering the hackney-coach, he ordered it to drive to the neighbourhood of the lake.

While proceeding thither, he reflected on all the details he had just gleaned from the secret registry of police. The self-styled Mr. Thompson was Colonel Malpas, and Mr. Smith was the Earl of Curzon. It was the Earl of Curzon, then, who was the faithless lover of Mrs. Roberts. But how completely identical appeared to be the objects which those two individuals had in view while visiting the Continent! Both were secretly following in the track of the Princess of Wales; each was intriguing with a lady in her household. That the earl's affair of gallantry was with Julia Owen, Loftus was already aware. Considering, then, everything he knew concerning the Misses Owen, was it not natural to infer that another of the sisters was the object of Malpas's intrigue? And in pursuance of the detestable mission which those girls had received, was it not probable enough that, while gratifying their passions on the one hand, they at the same time, on the other hand, artfully contrived to throw all the scandal of their amours upon the princess? Were not they guilty, and was not the princess innocent and unsuspecting?

Such were the conclusions to which Jocelyn naturally came, and the reader does not require to be informed how correct those surmises were. But while thus pondering on the details he had gleaned from the secret registry of police

and the deductions he had thence drawn, he could not help experiencing a sensation of disgust and loathing to think that the actions of individuals should be so minutely watched, even to the compromise of female reputations, by the myrmidons of the Genevese law. He also remarked, in the course of his meditations, that the police book did not seem to have contained any memorandum of the hiring of Kobolt and his gang to carry off the two females from the villa, and it was therefore to be supposed that the police had remained altogether in the dark upon the subject. As for the two ladies whom Malpas and Curzon really intended to have carried off on that occasion, who could they be if not two of the Misses Owen?

While thus pursuing his reflections, our hero reached the vicinage of the lake, and dismissing the hackney-coach, he walked down to the bank of that inland sea. It was now near eleven o'clock. The night was tolerably clear above, for the moon was shining, but a mist hung upon the water and the surrounding shore, involving all the features of the lake in obscurity.

Advancing along the margin of the water, Loftus presently reached an old jetty which was the index of the very spot for which he was searching, in pursuance of the hint he had received from Maravelli. The gloom was now deepening, the mist from the lake increasing in density and spreading so rapidly all around and high above that the pure azure of the heaven was veiled and the moon was at length only seen dimly like a pale lamp that is extinguishing. Jocelyn paused near the jetty and listened, but no sound save the rippling of the waters met his ear. For upwards of ten minutes did he remain, leaning against one of the huge piles of the jetty, wondering to himself whether Kobolt and his men would come thither that night. At length, finding that no one approached, he thought that he would return to Maravelli's and seek them on the following night at the public-house where they were accustomed to meet, and which the physician had proposed to indicate to him. But just as he was about to quit the spot where he had been standing, he heard the sounds of approaching footsteps and at once passed underneath the jetty. Three men soon emerged from the deepening gloom, carrying some ominous-looking implements over their shoulders, and Jocelyn at once felt

convinced these were the individuals whom he sought. But wishing to make sure, he remained silent and motionless where he was, to watch their proceedings.

Speaking but little, and this little in a flash language utterly incomprehensible to our hero, the three men went to work without loss of time. Mounting the pier, they threw in their dragging-implements, — for such was the tackle they had brought upon their shoulders, — and after several ineffectual hauls an ejaculation of satisfaction broke from the lips of one of them. Jocelyn, at no loss to conjecture the meaning of the cry, peeped forth, and as at that very moment a sudden breeze, almost amounting to a squall, swept over the lake, causing the mist to part asunder, as it were, the moon broke forth in the full power of its light, and the silvery beams fell upon the face of a corpse which the fishers of men were dragging to the surface of the water.

Our hero recoiled from the ghastly spectacle, and at the same instant a terrible imprecation burst from the three men. The corpse had broken away from their tackle, the squall having suddenly produced a strong current around the pier-head.

Jocelyn now showed himself, and called to the three men to come down. Starting at the appearance of our hero, they at first seemed to hesitate, but when, in the French language, he declared that he was alone and that he had no hostile intent, the fellows hastily descended from the top of the piles.

"Who the deuce are you?" demanded the foremost, who was decidedly entitled to carry off the palm of villainous looks from his companions, vile as their appearance also was. "Are you a spy? Do you mean suicide? Or are you a sleep-walker?"

"I am none of all these," said our hero, with the calmness of true courage.

"Then what do you here, young man?" demanded the ill-looking fellow.

"I am in search of a person named Kobolt," said Jocelyn, boldly.

"Ah!" was the man's ejaculation, "do you want him for good or for evil, to do him a mischief or to make his services available? Because it may be that I can help you to an

interview with him, but all depends on your answer to the questions I have just put."

" My object is by no means a hostile one," said Jocelyn, " but will put many louis into Kobolt's pocket. One word more: Doctor Maravelli gave me the hint that I should find Kobolt here, and now you may as well admit that you are the man."

The fellow looked slowly around, plunging his eyes with keen and straining penetration into the depths of the mist, which had now closed over the lake again, to ascertain whether there were any policemen on the watch at a distance. Then, evidently satisfied on this head, he observed, " Well, I am Kobolt, and these," he added, as his two companions came more forward, " are Hernani and Walden."

" Which names," said Jocelyn, as the two villainous-looking countenances were now as completely disclosed to his view as that of the foremost individual, " were likewise mentioned to me by Doctor Maravelli."

" Well, we have no reason to doubt your good faith," said Kobolt, fixing his eyes piercingly upon our hero. " You are a good-looking youth, and scarcely seem capable of treachery. Come, let us stand beneath the jetty. It is useless to run a risk of being seen. But you are an Englishman, eh? Well, I thought so by the look of you, and I am all the better pleased, because we pick up an occasional job from Englishmen, and have experienced, moreover, that they pay well."

Thus speaking, Kobolt passed underneath the jetty, accompanied by his two confederates and followed by Jocelyn. And now they were enveloped in almost total darkness, so that they could indeed converse without fear of observation should any one approach along the border of the lake. Loftus entertained no apprehension on finding himself in this lonely spot and in the deep obscurity along with such desperate men, for, in the first place, fear was unknown to him, and, secondly, he knew full well that if they wished to make away with him, they could as easily do it by the side of the jetty as under it.

" You have just observed that you sometimes find employment from English persons," said Jocelyn. " Perhaps you remember that about three weeks ago you were engaged to carry off two ladies from a certain villa? "

" Yes," exclaimed Kobolt, " a villa in the neighbourhood

here. But you were not one of the gentlemen who hired us? "

" No," observed Hernani, the Italian, " I'll swear that he was not one of them. He's a prettier looking fellow, though they were both handsome enough."

" I did not for a moment wish you to infer that I was one of them," remarked Jocelyn. " But what I require is that you relate to me every detail and particular connected with that affair whereof we are speaking."

" Before we do so," said Kobolt, " there are two little preliminaries to be fulfilled. The first is for you to tell us why you wish to ascertain these particulars at all, and the second is to afford us a proof that you know how to reward handsomely as well as to catechize closely."

" In respect to the first condition which you have set forth," returned Jocelyn, " it must suffice for you to know that you will not in the slightest degree endanger yourselves by giving me the information I seek, and secondly, I have twenty louis set apart for you in my waistcoat pocket. Here, give me your hand, Kobolt, and I will count them into your palm."

" This is businesslike," said Walden the Switzer.

" Nothing like Englishmen for doing things in a business-like manner," said Kobolt.

" You can go into the light," said Jocelyn, when he had given Kobolt the money, " and satisfy yourself that they are all good pieces."

" The chink is enough for me," observed the ruffian, as he made the coin jingle in his hand. Then, consigning it to his pocket, he continued thus: " Some weeks ago an English gentleman, who gave the same of Smith — wasn't it Smith, Hernani? "

" Just so," was the reply. " Nine Englishmen out of every ten are named Smith."

" Well, then, this Monsieur Smith managed to introduce himself to us, — no matter how, — and after a time he engaged us for a particular business. We were to get a post-chaise and four horses to carry off two ladies from the English princess's villa. One lady was to be walking inside the grounds in one particular spot, the other also inside the grounds, but at another spot. We were to seize upon them, seal their lips — not with kisses," added the fellow, chuckling

coarsely, " no, no, the gentlemen were to do that, but with our hands, and we were told not to damage their sweet lips and beautiful teeth."

" Ah! then you were led to believe that the two ladies were young and beautiful? " said Loftus.

" So we fancied," returned Kobolt, " but we made a sad mistake. In a word, we carried off two females from the very places pointed out to us, but they turned out to be two elderly hags. Well, as there are many different ideas about beauty, and as we didn't exactly know what English taste might be, we resolved to keep possession of the old ladies, particularly as we had found them each in the very spot pointed out by our employers. But when we got to Lausanne, by the saints! what a scene ensued. It was indeed a mistake from beginning to end, and so there was nothing left to do but to bring the old ladies back again. This we did, having been assured that we should not be troubled in the matter, and, sure enough, we never have heard any more of the business in any shape or way."

" So far, so good," said Jocelyn, " and now will you inform me whether, during the last three weeks, indeed, ever since that particular night, you have experienced any peculiar good luck in your avocation as fishers of men? "

" To tell you the truth," answered Kobolt, " this is the first time we resumed our fishing occupation since that very night whereof we have been speaking, and for this seeming idleness on our part there have been two reasons. The first is, we heard that a watch had been set for us by the police, and so we thought we would rest awhile till we found the coast clear again; and secondly, we were so well paid by your fellow countrymen Smith and Thompson that we could afford to give ourselves a holiday for a short time."

" Well, and now there need be no further delay in continuing your night's sport," returned our hero.

" Perdition! " ejaculated Hernani, " the young gentleman wishes to see us at our work."

" Or else," added Walden, " he wants to become one of us."

" Hold your tongues! " growled Kobolt, savagely. " The gentleman has some other and deeper meaning. Now, sir, what is it? Let us be frank with each other."

" I have no objection," rejoined Jocelyn. " Know, then,

that I have some reason to believe the corpse of a child, a new-born infant, was thrown into the lake close by this very jetty about three weeks ago. From what I have understood, it was wrapped in a flannel that was carefully tied around it."

"And you want it fished up for some reason or another?" said Kobolt, interrogatively. "Well, if it was sunk with a stone or anything heavy, it is no doubt at the bottom still, for whatever gets into what may be called the little bay, on either side of the jetty, always remains there."

"Well," said Jocelyn, "let us waste no more time in words. You liked the chink of those twenty louis so well that you would doubtless be pleased to finger another twenty. You shall do so if you drag me up the corpse of that child."

The three men exchanged amongst themselves a few low and rapidly whispered observations in their peculiar argot, or slang language, which, as we have above stated, was utterly incomprehensive to our hero. This discourse only lasted for a minute, and when it was over, Kobolt, again addressing Loftus in the French tongue, said, "Your request about this child is so extraordinary that I and my companions hesitate to proceed farther unless you give us some explanation. The truth is, it is like advancing in the dark. We do not see into what trouble we might get ourselves, and though we are no cowards, and not overparticular what we do as long as we are well paid, yet we do not exactly choose to walk blindfold over a precipice."

"I shall assuredly give you no explanations at all," said Loftus. "If the corpse be found, I pay you for it and take it away with me. Whatever danger may result will accrue only unto me, and I am prepared to encounter it. But I do not wish you to proceed farther unless you choose. Wait until to-morrow night, and in the meantime ask Doctor Maravelli whether I am trustworthy. Then if, despite the answer you receive from him, you should still hesitate, I can but purchase drags and come and fish, as you call it, on my own account."

Again did the three men converse together in their own flash tongue, and at the end of this second consultation Kobolt exclaimed, "Well, we have made up our minds to run any risk there may be in this business."

Having thus spoken, he emerged forth from beneath the jetty, followed by his two accomplices and our hero. Deep

was the obscurity which prevailed, and which had now well-nigh absorbed the moonlight altogether. But still there was a certain hazy glimmering upon the water, and Jocelyn closely watched the preparations which the men made for their fishing experiments. They had two kinds of tackle. One was a net made in the shape of a bag, and fastened to a large hoop, to which were attached four cords, joining together at the length of about a dozen feet, and at this point of junction they were united to one good stout rope. The other sort of tackle consisted of a row of grappling-irons fastened to a bar of wood about four feet long, and with this instrument the bottom of the lake might be, as it were, raked, so as to catch hold of anything that had even become embedded in the mud or clay.

With these two distinct apparatus three or four fresh hauls were now made, the men either wading out to their middle in the water, or else climbing along the cross-beams on the side of the jetty, so as to be enabled to fling their tackle as far away from the land as possible, and thus drag the whole of the little bay formed by the wooden pier and the indented shore.

Little was said during the half-hour at first expended in this manner, but presently an exclamation from Kobolt, as he raised the net above described, drew the notice of his comrades and Jocelyn toward him.

"Here is something very much like it," he said, as he proceeded to examine the net, and from amidst a quantity of weeds, stones, and mire he dragged forth a shapeless object which he at once pronounced to be the corpse of an infant wrapped up in flannel.

One of the men now produced a piece of canvas, which made a fitting envelope for the corpse, to secure our hero's hand against too close a contact with the loathsome object. He now paid Kobolt the remaining twenty louis, according to promise, and took his departure with his strange, we might almost say dreadful, burden.

Uninterruptedly and free from molestation did our hero retrace his way to Maravelli's house, the exact position of which with regard to the lake he had not much difficulty in remembering, having been led thither direct from the water's edge (although considerably lower down) by Mrs. Roberts on the preceding night.

On reaching his temporary place of abode, he was admitted by the physician himself, who generally answered the bell at late hours, and when the front door was closed, Loftus said, " Let me at once enter your private room, and take care that no one intrudes."

" Every one in the house has retired to rest save you and me," said the doctor. " But what, in Heaven's name, have you there? " he asked.

" You shall see," returned our hero, and he hastened into the little sombre-looking parlour, followed by Maravelli.

" Ah! I can now guess what you have been about," said the latter, with a frightened look. " You have found the fishers of men; they have fished for you to some purpose. But what on earth is the meaning of all this? What mischief is brewing? Speak, let me know the worst," and the doctor trembled all over, as if shaking with the palsy, while the pallor of death overspread his countenance.

" I have already told you," said Jocelyn, in an earnest voice, " that you have nothing to fear on my account. No harm shall befall you, provided you do everything that I require at your hands. I am not warring against you; I have no personal enmity toward you. On the contrary, I have already given you a guarantee of my ability and desire to recompense you."

" With these assurances I am tranquillized," said the physician.

While this colloquy was going on, Jocelyn had placed his burden upon the table, and had loosened the canvas wrapper. It now appeared that a large stone was tied in a white cambric handkerchief around the neck of the dead infant. This Jocelyn removed, and then unrolled the flannel that had enveloped the corpse. Its face was horribly disfigured, and was not distinguishable as the countenance of a human being. But upon this we will not dwell. Loathsome indeed was the object, and Jocelyn's repugnance to meddle with it, or to think of keeping it for any time instead of at once consigning it to the earth, was only overruled by a conviction that the proceeding was one of imperious necessity and vitally important to the success of the great enterprise which he had in view.

But to continue. In order to proceed with his investigation it was necessary to procure a basin of water wherein to

soak the cambric handkerchief by which the stone was attached and the flannel garment in which the corpse had been enveloped, so completely covered, or, indeed, saturated with slimy mud were they. This being done, Loftus proceeded to examine the cambric handkerchief, and in one of the corners he found the initials E. O.

" Emma Owen," he said, as he pointed them out to Maravelli. " And you are a witness, doctor, in case of necessity, that this handkerchief was attached to the corpse."

" Yes," returned the medical man, hesitatingly. " But Heaven send that there shall be no need for any witnesses to give their testimony at all."

" Rest assured that I will manage everything in a manner to avoid scandal and exposure," said Loftus, much to the physician's satisfaction at this reiterated promise of immunity. " Now for the flannel garment," added our hero, and after closely examining this article, he said, " Doctor, what are these initials? "

" A. O.," replied the physician, easily deciphering the letters.

" Agatha Owen," said Loftus.

" Then, perhaps," exclaimed Maravelli, a light now suddenly breaking in upon him, " you do not believe that it was the princess who was delivered of a child? "

" No, I do not believe it," returned Loftus, " and you shall see that step by step I will unravel the whole skein of this dark and mysterious proceeding, tangled though it be. Hold your peace, follow my counsel, do as I require, and you shall be well rewarded; but act otherwise, seek to betray me, or disobey my directions, and you shall be exposed fully and punished mercilessly."

" Depend upon it, Mr. Loftus," said Maravelli, " I will serve you in all things," and it was now with fear and trembling that he gazed upon our young hero, who seemed like an avenging angel pursuing the thread of Heaven's own inscrutable designs.

" You have told me," he resumed, fixing his eyes upon Maravelli with a look that showed he was determined to be obeyed in whatever he demanded, " you have told me that you frequently devote your leisure hours to anatomical pursuits, and that Kobolt and his companions supply you with what the faculty denominate subjects. In that

case you must have a dissecting-room, and it is there that I propose to leave this infant corpse for the present. Now conduct me to your dissecting-room, doctor."

Maravelli took up the lamp, while Loftus, having secured the telltale cambric handkerchief and flannel about his person, enveloped the tiny corpse in the canvas, and with his loathsome burden followed the doctor, who led him through the hall opening from a dark passage at the end. This place was fitted up with all the grim, hideous machinery and apparatus of a dissecting-room. There was the pulley fixed to the ceiling, with the cord and the hook attached thereto, so as to elevate at will a corpse when stretched upon the slightly inclining plane of the leaden table over which the cordage hung. There were scalpels, dissecting-knives, saws, trepanning instruments, and various anatomical implements, pails also, to catch the fluids and the entrails of the subjects, and mops to cleanse the floor. In a word, the studio was complete for its ghastly purpose, and although there was no corpse at the moment when Maravelli led Jocelyn in, yet was there a faint, sickly odour against which the heart heaved. It seemed as if the clammy, nauseating smell of the dead had settled itself in that place, clinging to the very ceiling and walls like a grave-mist, fetid and inexpulsable.

Against the wall stood two upright boxes, tall, narrow, and painted black. One of the doors had by some accident come open, revealing a bleached skeleton as the ghastly tenant of that wooden home.

"These are the bones of a murderer, who was guillotined about seven years ago in the market-place," said the physician, pointing to the object just named. "The other box contains the skeleton of his wife, who suffered death with him and for the same cause. I obtained possession of their corpses after their execution, and have preserved their bones thus. Where the vertebræ of the neck were severed by the axe of the guillotine, I have fastened the bones with wire.

But Loftus did not pay any particular attention to these anatomies, which were in reality the objects of the physician's special admiration, and having deposited the corpse of the child upon the leaden table, he turned away from the dissecting-room.

"I shall not insult you by demanding the key of that

place," he said to Maravelli, as they again stood together in the hall, " but I charge you not to let those remains disappear from the table where I have left them."

" I shall not deceive you in any way, Mr. Loftus," responded Maravelli, as he locked the door of the dissecting-room and put the key in his pocket.

He and Jocelyn then separated, each to retire to his respective chamber; and when our hero was alone, he could not help felicitating himself upon having been enabled, by a favourable concatenation of circumstances, to do so much in comparatively so short a period of time toward the unravelment of the conspiracy against the persecuted wife of the prince regent.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE THREE SISTERS

THE day that dawned upon the night of Jocelyn's adventures, as just recorded, was ushered in by one of those brilliant mornings which render the climate so wholesome, the heavens so cloudless, and the whole face of nature so transcendingly beautiful for the dweller upon the banks of Lake Leman. It was, as the reader is aware, the early part of May at the period of which we are writing, and many of those fruits which in England are not ripened until six weeks later were now gemming the borders, or hanging in rich clusters to the trees. Thus strawberries, cherries, gooseberries, currants, and all the earlier fruits were mingling their luscious hues with the emerald foliage, and the gardens belonging to the suburban villas of Geneva appeared in all the pride of their beauty.

It was about half-past seven o'clock on this lovely morning that three beautiful creatures were gathered in a balcony at the open casement of a bedchamber overlooking the garden of the princess's villa. These were Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen.

Agatha, the eldest, appeared the least thing pale and delicate. Indeed, but three weeks had elapsed since she became a mother under the circumstances already described, and with an amazing fortitude and a surprising amount of physical energy had she performed all her duties as heretofore, ever in attendance upon the princess, always one of the first down at the breakfast-table, and scrupulously regular in observing the routine of the household. Thus was it utterly impossible to suspect that she had so recently passed through that ordeal which is so terrible even for the woman who is surrounded by all comforts fitted for the occasion,

and who, by having no shame to conceal, may retain her couch until nature restores herself again. But it was not without a painful effort that Agatha had thus defied, as it were, the ordinary course of nature, and there had been moments when, though the smile was upon her lip, agony was in all her limbs, and though her spirits seemed elevated as if inspired by thrilling music, her frame was in reality drooping as if she must sink down through mere exhaustion. Indeed, had it not been for certain excellent restoratives and sovereign cordials which Mrs. Ranger had administered, Agatha never could have sustained her part in such a manner; but even though she succeeded in doing so, it was at some little sacrifice of her health, and the wonder with her sisters and Mrs. Ranger was, not that she looked somewhat pale and delicate, but that she was so little pale and delicate as she appeared.

And now behold her, in a loose morning wrapper, one of those elegant French muslin negligees which so well become a lovely woman and give such an air of sweet and touching interest to the invalid, one of those negligees, in a word, which tantalize the eye with glimpses of the charms that they envelop and which reveal all the contours that they ought to conceal. But it was through no coquetry at the present moment that Agatha Owen had assumed this winning garb; it was merely thrown hastily on ere her toilet was completed, in order that she might enjoy with her sisters the fresh air of the morning in that balcony, and woo to her pale face the breeze which, blowing softly and gently over the warm plains, lost the chill at first imparted by the snow-capped mountains. For such a breeze was well calculated to bring the blush of the rose back to Agatha's countenance, and as she inhaled that pure air, it seemed as if her lungs expanded with the renovation of vigorous health.

One arm, the roundness of which was defined by an elegant bracelet, lay negligently over the plump white shoulders of her sister Emma, whose morning toilet was completed; while on the other side of Agatha appeared Julia, equally lovely, equally dissolute, but more sentimental and affectionate than her sisters.

Agatha's dark brown hair was arranged in glossy bands, ornamented with a white rose, an emblem of that chastity which she possessed not. Emma's hair was in tresses, but

gathered in a knot behind, and fastened with a circlet of pearls, being thus drawn up from a neck that was dazzling in its whiteness and admirable in its arching shapeliness. Julia's hair showered in a myriad ringlets over her white sloping shoulders, and down upon her fine bosom, which the morning dress left much exposed, according to the fashion of the time. She also wore a white rose at the side of her head, and of her it might be observed, as of her elder sister, that it was an emblem of the purity which had passed away from her.

Very beautiful appeared the three sisters as they thus inhaled the fresh breeze of morning in that balcony worked over with embroidery of real flowers, and, alas! sorrowful indeed is the reflection that the external aspect of those lovely creatures was very far from serving as an index of their minds within. Fair and stainless were the caskets as they seemed to the eye, but no gems of matchless price were enclosed in those angelic incarnations. No, in proportion as the exterior embellishments were beautiful and captivating, so were the internal thoughts corrupt and impure. Ah! of what avail is the snowy bosom if the heart that beats within is a volcano of furious passions?

But to continue the thread of our narrative. Between seven and eight on this delightful morning was it that Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen were together in the balcony of the eldest sister's chamber.

" Who could ever wish to return to cold and cheerless England from such a clime as this? " said Julia, as she slowly carried her fine hazel eyes over the garden belonging to the villa, the fields beyond, and the mountains which rose in the distance.

" Would you really like to settle down at Geneva with some good-tempered, confiding husband, a native of the country? " asked Emma, raising her own dark eyes toward her younger sister.

" No, I do not think I should like to marry a foreigner," replied Julia.

" Well, then," resumed Emma, " what should you say to settling down here, in a villa of your own, as an independent lady, but of course with a lover on the sly to be a consolation and a companion in hours that would otherwise be monotonous indeed? "

" I am sure," said Agatha, the eldest sister, " that you can neither be such silly girls as to think of settling here in a foreign country. In the first place, to marry on the Continent is really no joke, for if the husband should happen to catch you going a little astray, he can have you locked up in prison for a couple of years or so. Then, as to the other alternative, of always solacing oneself with lovers, let me assure you that nothing would be more dreadful than to be exposed to the jealousy of these foreign admirers. It frequently happens that they murder their mistresses through excessive love, and then make away with themselves."

" Ah! this is a little exaggeration and romancing on your part, Agatha," observed Emma, laughing. " However, I can safely promise you that I have no thought of settling myself here, and I can answer for Julia that she is not so foolish, either."

" So far," resumed Agatha, " from our even dreaming of such a thing, I sincerely hope that we shall soon be enabled to give up our present mission and receive its reward."

" Hush! do not speak too loud," said Emma. " We may be overheard from the neighbouring windows. But speaking of a reward, what recompense will be conferred on us, think you? The prince regent could scarcely create us peeresses in our own right, with handsome pensions. The scandal would be too great," she continued, in a low and cautious tone, " after we shall have been called upon to give evidence against the princess — "

" Hush! hush! 'tis for you now to be cautious, you silly girl," said Julia, placing her hand playfully upon her sister's mouth.

" What should you say, then," asked Agatha, bending down and speaking in a whisper, " if the prince were to find each of us an old wealthy peer, just so far advanced in his dotage as to be amorously inclined, without being overnice as to the reputation his bride may have borne before her marriage? "

" Something of this sort must the prince do for us," said Emma.

" Mamma hinted as much in the last letter she wrote to Mrs. Ranger," said Agatha. " But come, you must assist me to finish my toilet. The hour advances for us to descend to the breakfast-table."

Thus speaking, the eldest sister stepped back from the balcony into her chamber, and putting off the elegant French wrapper, she proceeded to array herself in the garb prescribed by the fashion of the time as the morning toilet for ladies in attendance upon royalty. This costume partook more of that which constitutes the evening dress of the present day, for the corsage was cut low, the sleeves were short, and a profusion of jewelry was worn.

"I wonder," said Emma, as she assisted Agatha to put on her dress, "whether the change of affairs in France will turn to the advantage of our former friend, Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, as he chose to call himself," and she laughed gaily at the reminiscences which the mention of his name conjured up.

"Doubtless he is still a prisoner at Grenoble," said Agatha. "At all events, he was still a captive there at the time the last accounts were received in England from the French authorities respecting him."

"Ah!" observed Julia, "but that was before the sudden and unexpected return of Napoleon into France. We know not what may have happened since — "

"Depend upon it," interrupted Agatha, "if Jocelyn — I suppose we shall never call him by any other name than Jocelyn," she added, laughing. "But I was going to observe that if he were free, you may rely upon it we should have heard or seen something of him at Geneva ere this. Come, Julia, confess, would you not like to have to play Laura Linden all over again?"

"If you could ensure me a successful result," rejoined the youngest of the three charming demireps, "but that was something more than you could even achieve for yourselves," she added, with a merry laugh that rang musically through the chamber.

"Never did a young man withstand such temptations before," said Emma. "May we not without vanity declare that it was the three Graces tempting Apollo?"

"Three goddesses tempting a youth of godlike beauty," observed Agatha. "You know that at Richmond we were called the Four Goddesses."

"Including poor Mary," said Julia, with a sigh. "I wish she was with us, instead of being buried in that cottage in Canterbury, where she still was when mamma last wrote — "

" Oh, never mind Mary," interrupted Agatha, somewhat petulantly. " She is something more than sentimental, she is a maudlin, sickening spoony with her rigid ideas of virtue. But we have been talking of Jocelyn Loftus. How is it that not once, during the present conversation, the names of Curzon and Malpas have been mentioned? " she asked, her beautiful countenance softening into an arch smile.

" What! " ejaculated Emma, " after the scandalous trick they endeavoured to play us, plotting to carry us off to Lausanne by means of such dreadful villains as that Kobolt and his gang, whom, as we have since heard, rumour declares to be nothing less than resurrection-men. Ah! if I were old Mrs. Ranger, I should never fancy myself again after having been in contact with those ruffians. I should always suspect my very clothes smelled of dead bodies. And old Mrs. Hubbard, too."

" I really cannot help laughing," said Agatha, " when I think of those two antiquated heroines of the abduction scene."

" How astounded Malpas must have been! " said Emma. " Served him right, too. I am very glad of it."

" Poor Curzon! " murmured the sentimental Julia, " I really think the punishment was too severe, seeing that he meant to carry me off through love."

" I dare say if you were to meet him again, Julia," said Agatha, " you would forgive him."

" She might," exclaimed Emma, " but I declare I would never forgive Malpas."

" Nor would I forgive Curzon," retorted Julia, raising her head proudly. " You both seem to think I am weak-minded and foolish. I tell you that I am as strong in purpose as either of you, and therefore, once for all, let me beg that I may be believed when I declare that whenever I meet Curzon again I will tell him frankly and candidly that everything is at an end between us. As for you, Emma," she continued, flinging a somewhat angry but also arch look upon her sister, " it is very easy of you to talk so slightingly of Malpas, since you have already formed a new attachment. Ah! don't think that I am blind to the amorous looks which you have lately flung upon the good-looking equerry."

" What! Baron Bergami? " ejaculated Agatha. Then,

evidently struck by something, she immediately added, "And now that I recollect, you have so managed, Emma, for some days past that he shall sit next to you at breakfast and give you his arm from the drawing-room to the dining-room. Yes, and also last evening and the evening before, when we all walked out along the shore — Ah! Emma, how the blood is rising to your cheek!" exclaimed Agatha, laughing, as she held her snowy hand against her sister's face, which had indeed become of the richest carnation. "How it burns!"

"Come, I will make a confession," said Emma, now endeavouring to escape from her confusion in a merry laugh, "and I know not why I should have attempted to conceal this new feeling even for a single day, inasmuch as we do not usually have any secrets from each other. The truth is, I have been playing Baron Bergami so long and to such effect that I have fallen in love with him myself. Now, my dear girls, you must observe that when I am dressed up for that particular purpose, with my hair all gathered so as to appear to flow just down as far as the nape of the neck, like Bergami's, with that elegant frock coat, too, imprisoning me in the admirable symmetry of its shapely cut, then, with those trousers with their great plaits at the hips and around the front, gradually diminishing until they terminate in a graceful arch over the boots, yes, and then those loves of boots themselves, so exquisitely shaped, with such high heels, making me at least two inches taller than I am, and giving such a hollow to the shape of my foot that as I stand you might roll a half-crown upright underneath, when I see myself thus attired, the snowy shirt-frill arranged in such a manner as to conceal the swell of my bosom, and last, though not least, those false whiskers and that elegant moustache, when I contemplate myself, I say, thus attired, in the full-length mirror, I really fancy that I am Bergami — and — and — don't you think that the baron is very, very handsome?"

The manner in which Emma asked this question suddenly gave such a droll turn to the graphic and picturesque portraiture she had been drawing of herself that Agatha and Julia could not help bursting out laughing. Emma also laughed, and a delightful spectacle was it, the mirth of those three lovely girls, a mirth that displayed teeth white as

ivory between lips of wet coral, teeth which were pure and perfect as pearls themselves could be, and lips which seemed so fresh in their dewy moisture that it were hard indeed to believe that the hot kisses of burning lust had ever been pressed upon them. But, oh, who that observes the rose when drooping at eve with the diamond dewdrops sparkling upon every modestly closing leaf, would imagine that this flower seemingly so pure, so chaste, so delicate, had been boldly basking in the gorgeous sunlight during the whole day, and had drunk in the impassioned glow without parching or scorching?

" Then are we to understand," said Agatha, when her own and her sisters' mirth had somewhat subsided, " that you love Bergami? "

" Yes, love him as I loved Jocelyn," answered Emma, " because he was handsome and I desired him; or love him as I have loved Malpas, because I cannot exist without a lover."

" Oh, we can understand why you love him," exclaimed Agatha, still laughing. " But remember, Emma," she added, more seriously, " these amours may have their consequences, as mine did, and it may not always be so easy to get over them — "

" Well, my dear sister," interrupted Emma, " it will be time enough to talk of that when the danger presents itself. Besides, you must not get on too fast in your conjectures. I am very far from having ensnared Bergami as yet. He even appears rather distant, — not exactly distant, for he is politeness itself, as you well know, but he will not see that I love him. If my hand lingers in his, he does not press it; if my looks fix themselves upon him, his are cast down; if my foot happens to rest against his under the table, he begs my pardon, as if he himself had accidentally kicked me."

" Why, this is as bad as Loftus in the post-chaise," exclaimed Agatha, " when we first travelled with him, and before we knew who he really was. And yet the baron does not look as if he would prove another Jocelyn, nor do I believe that there can be more than one man of Jocelyn's stoic disposition in the world, and that man is Jocelyn himself."

" Well, at all events, I intend to subdue Bergami if it be

possible," observed Emma. "By the bye," she added, suddenly turning the conversation to another topic as a thought struck her, "did not her Royal Highness say something yesterday about getting up private theatricals for our own amusement here at the villa?"

"Yes," answered Julia, "but in consequence of some observation that was made by one of the ladies, I fancy her Royal Highness will renounce the idea."

"Ah! I recollect," said Emma. "The princess was reminded that her husband, the prince regent, had given a series of private theatricals at Carlton House, and she does not wish to imitate at Geneva what he does in London."

"I noticed that her Royal Highness," continued Julia, "was looking, last evening, when we returned from our walk, over the file of English newspapers, and I saw that she was scanning with great attention a description which the *Times* gave of the very first private representation, in December last, at Carlton House. I watched her Royal Highness as she read over the names of all the élite of the aristocracy who were present. Of course there was the brilliant and incomparable Lady Sackville, the Countess of Curzon, the Marchioness of Conyngham, Miss Bathurst, Miss Arbuthnot, Lady Prescott — "

"Oh, never mind enumerating the names," interrupted Emma. "We have scanned them over and over again a dozen times. Depend upon it that her Royal Highness regards as a personal enemy, and also as a positive rival, every young and good-looking woman who visits at Carlton House."

"No doubt she does, and naturally so under the circumstances," observed Agatha. "But what has all this got to do with the topic on which we were conversing, the private theatricals?"

"Oh, only this," returned Julia, "that I was about to add, when Emma interrupted me, that so soon as her Royal Highness read over that list of names, she said, 'Oh, I perceive that one must have the most dazzling beauties that can be congregated to make private theatricals go off well, and therefore we will not attempt anything of the sort here.' This she said with considerable bitterness," observed Julia.

At this moment a timepiece on the mantel in Agatha's room chimed half-past eight, and the three young ladies, suddenly cutting short their colloquy, hastened down to the breakfast-parlour.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE AUDIENCE AND THE LETTER

It was a little past noon on the same day, and her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was walking in the garden, attended by Agatha, Emma, and Julia, as ladies in waiting, the other three ladies of her suite not being on duty for this day. The Baron Bergami was likewise present as equerry in waiting.

Her Royal Highness was at this time forty-five years of age. She was stout; her embonpoint had expanded into luxuriance, slightly perhaps approaching to coarseness. Her cheeks had a somewhat heightened colour upon them, which was not exactly that of health, but seemed to indicate a love of good living. Nevertheless she was temperate and abstemious, and that inclination to ruddiness was entirely natural. Her neck, being totally deficient in that graceful arching which gives a statuesque and dignified air to a well-dressed woman, had the same awkwardness of appearance as if it were short. Her eyes were handsome and of a fine blue, indicating good temper and generosity of heart. It was perhaps this expression, added to a placid, unaffected smile, which from her girlhood had seemed stereotyped upon her lips, which to some degree prevented the observer from noticing the shade of mournfulness which nevertheless had for years past been growing upon her countenance; and as her disposition was naturally lively and vivacious, she did not outwardly display as much feeling as she inwardly experienced relative to the misfortunes that had overtaken her and the bitter hatred of which her husband made her the victim. In a word, that she was an amiable, well-meaning, kind-hearted woman, there can be no doubt; that she was thoughtless, and that her manners were characterized with

all the freedom peculiar to Continental ladies, cannot be denied; but that she was criminal and faithless to her husband is not to be believed for a single moment.

And now a few words relative to Bergami. He was at the time of which we are writing about thirty-eight years of age, and remarkably handsome. His dark hair, glossy whiskers, and delicately pencilled moustache set off a countenance that was pale and pensive. His dark eyes were generally cast downward, as if in thought, but his fine form, slender even to youthful symmetry, was upright as a dart. He dressed habitually in deep black, though on formal occasions, when in attendance upon the princess, he wore a sort of uniform surtout coat of blue cloth, frogged, braided, and buttoned close up to the ch . In either costume he looked the perfect gentleman, but in the latter he had a military appearance truly becoming.

In manners he was gentle, unassuming, but agreeably courteous. His conversation, unobtrusive and quiet, was interesting, instructive, and often fascinating, while he himself appeared entirely unconscious of its powers. Toward the princess his demeanour was ever characterized by the most marked respect, and though from his very boyhood he had known her, yet did he never appear to lose sight of the great distance which social conventionalisms had placed between him and her. Indeed, so delicate, so considerate, and so nobly generous was his behaviour toward her Royal Highness that he never, under any circumstances, would allow himself to be left alone with her even for an instant; and if, when in the drawing-room, he beheld a chance of all the ladies in waiting being absent from the apartment at one and the same moment, he invariably made it a point of retiring ere left in *tête-à-tête* with the princess.

Having recorded these few observations relative to characters whom history has made memorable, we now resume the thread of our narrative.

" I am sure I do not know how long we are likely to remain here," said the princess, pursuing the thread of a conversation already commenced in the drawing-room ere she came out to walk in the garden. " So much now depends upon the course which events may take in France. You see, it is quite evident from the newspaper reports that there will

be a desperate struggle between Bonaparte and the Allies. Is it not so, baron?"

"No doubt of it, madam," responded Bergami, to whom the query was addressed. "Immense preparations are being made, and it is probable that your Royal Highness's august father, the Duke of Brunswick, will be invested with a very important command in the armies mustered for the coming conflict."

"And if Napoleon be beaten?" said the princess, inquiringly.

"Then peace, your Royal Highness will instantaneously be given to Europe — I may add, to the whole world," answered Bergami.

"But if, on the other hand, Napoleon should conquer?" asked the princess.

"Then, madam," rejoined the equerry, "it will be impossible to foresee the consequences. But this much may be predicted, that all Continental Europe is sure to be subjected to the emperor's sway."

"And as the wife of the prince regent," continued her Royal Highness, "I should incur the risk of being seized upon by the French, even here at Geneva, and thrown into some fortress. Well, then, as I was telling you, young ladies, just now," she continued, addressing herself to Agatha and Julia, while Emma remained behind, walking by the side of Bergami, "our sojourn in this beautiful spot depends entirely on the course that occurrences may take."

At this moment a page was seen advancing from the villa, and approaching the princess, he said, with a low obeisance, "May it please your Royal Highness, an English lady craves an audience."

"Give me the lady's card, that I may hand it to her Royal Highness," at once said Agatha, who, as well as her sisters, was ever on the alert to prevent any one from obtaining access to the princess unless it suited their purpose.

"The lady neither gave name nor card," said the page, "but requested that this note might be handed to her Royal Highness, should there be any hesitation manifested in receiving her."

According to the etiquette invariably observed in respect to royal personages, Agatha, as the senior lady in waiting,

received the note which the page now presented, and opening it, she ran her eyes quickly over its contents.

"Oh, it is no one of any consequence, — a mere pretence and excuse," she said. "Your Royal Highness will do well to decide upon not granting this interview."

"But what does the note say?" asked the princess. "Who is the lady? What does she pretend to be?"

"Evidently an impostress," rejoined Agatha. "Your Royal Highness's exceeding benevolence and charity give encouragement to all kinds of persons to approach as suppliants for your bounty. Shall I order the page to state that your Royal Highness cannot be disturbed at present?"

The princess, good-natured and confiding as she was, and never liking to thwart the ladies by whom she was surrounded, was about to give her assent to the course which Agatha suggested, when the sudden fancy took her that she would look at that note which had just been presented. Perhaps it was a mere whim on the princess's part thus to peruse that note, or perhaps it was that Miss Owen had on this occasion slightly overacted her part and had seemed too anxious to prevent the audience solicited, so that a faint suspicion, but vague and indefinite, was excited in the princess's mind. Whichever were the cause, certain it is that the princess suddenly assumed an air of decision and firmness which she seldom wore on ordinary occasions, and turning to Agatha, she said, "Give me that note."

Miss Owen dared not disobey, nor was she even imprudent enough to show any reluctance, but at once placed the billet in her Royal Highness's hand. The princess thereupon glanced over its contents, which ran as follows:

"May it please your Royal Highness, the writer of this is a lady who has had the honour of enjoying the acquaintance of your Royal Highness's august daughter the Princess Charlotte, and she has likewise been honoured by the notice of her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia. She is the bearer of a letter of the utmost importance from the latter princess to your Royal Highness, and therefore most respectfully and humbly solicits an interview, that she may have an opportunity of presenting the same to your Royal Highness, she being pledged to deliver that letter into your Royal Highness's own hand. If your Royal Highness's suppliant refrains from appending her name to this letter,

it is for a reason which will be satisfactorily explained should the honour of an audience be granted."

"I really do not see, Miss Owen," said the princess, with a voice and look of gentle though grave remonstrance, "that you were justified in coming to so rapid and uncharitable a conclusion relative to the writer of this note. There is nothing on the face of it which should have led you to suppose that she wished to obtain access to me for mendicant purposes."

"Your Royal Highness must surely be aware," answered Agatha, with the coolest effrontery, "that the writers of begging letters adopt all kinds of subterfuges and devices — "

"But I do not think this is a case in point," interrupted the princess, still in a tone of rebuke. "At all events — "

"Heaven forbid that I should venture to interpose my humble opinion, well meant though it be, in a manner disagreeable to your Royal Highness!" And as Agatha thus spoke with an assumed tone of deep humiliation, she affected also to be hurt by her royal mistress's manner toward her, and the crocodile tears trickled down her cheeks.

"My dear girl," exclaimed the generous-hearted princess, touched by Agatha's apparent grief, "not for a moment did I intend to wound your feelings. I have no doubt that you acted for the best."

"As I always do, in my love and devotion toward your Royal Highness," said Agatha, now pretending to cheer up. "But if you have resolved, madam, to see this lady, permit me, at all events, to go and satisfy myself that she is a person who may with propriety be introduced into your royal presence."

"Whoever she may be, I will see her," said the princess, again speaking in a tone of decision. Then addressing the page, she said, "Go and bring that lady hither. I will see her here."

Agatha, Emma, and Julia exchanged quick glances with each other, to imply their fear that something was wrong, but these looks were so swiftly interchanged that they were not noticed by either the princess or Bergami.

Her Royal Highness now placed herself on one of the elegant garden seats, made of iron and painted green, which were ranged at intervals along the walks. Agatha stood

on her right hand, Emma, Julia, and Bergami took their stations behind their royal mistress. Nothing was now said during the couple of minutes which elapsed ere the page reappeared, escorting the visitress thither. But during that brief interval her Royal Highness once more perused the note which she still held in her hand, while Agatha hastily collected all her ideas and summoned all her presence of mind to her aid, for she felt convinced that some scene requiring no ordinary artifice, ingenuity, and duplicity was now at hand.

The moment the page was again seen advancing, all eyes were fixed upon the lady who accompanied him, and Agatha as well as her sisters at once perceived that every chance of being enabled to throw upon her the slur of a begging-letter impostress was gone. For she was not only handsomely dressed in half-mourning, but her whole appearance indicated the well-bred, elegant lady in good circumstances. On approaching the princess, she raised her veil and revealed a handsome countenance, whose beauty was enhanced at the moment by the glow which the excitement she now experienced conjured up to her cheeks. The princess instantaneously fancied that those features were not altogether unknown to her, but beyond this she had no defined and positive recollection of the lady. As for Agatha and her sisters, they were totally unacquainted with her, but the quick glances they flung upon her as she accosted their royal mistress seemed intended to pierce her through and through.

The page, having conducted the visitress into the presence of the Princess Caroline, withdrew to a distance, beyond ear-shot, so as to be ready to show her out again from the garden when the interview should be ended. The lady made a courtly obeisance as she approached the princess, and then stood waiting to be spoken to before she herself ventured to breathe a word. Indeed, her whole manner, conduct, and bearing at once proved that she was accustomed to the etiquette of royal circles.

"I have read your note, madam, with the greatest attention and interest," began the princess, with a voice and mien alike affable and encouraging. "You say that you have a letter?"

"In the first place, may it please your Royal Highness,"

said Agatha, advancing a step or two, "this lady will be kind enough to go through the usual formality and give me her card, that I may present it to your Royal Highness."

"Most cheerfully will I do so at once," answered the lady, in a mild but firm voice, "provided that the mention of my name may not in any way prejudice the object of my mission," and here her large dark eyes were swept rapidly over the three ladies in waiting, whom she no doubt at once perceived to be sisters, and thence perhaps guessed who they were.

"Your card, madam?" said Agatha, somewhat imperiously. "No stranger is allowed to exchange words with her Royal Highness until the name has been duly announced and the presence of the individual approved of."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the lady, "to read the letter of which I am the bearer?" and she raised her hand to the bosom of her dress to draw forth the despatch she alluded to.

"Madam, your card?" repeated Agatha, now speaking more imperiously than before, and extending her hand to receive the card which she thus demanded in a way that showed she would take no refusal.

"Yes," said the princess, herself beginning to think there was something suspicious in the lady refusing to give her name, "you must announce who you are, and I promise that whatever name it may be, the avowal shall not in any way prejudice you, though I am at a loss to conceive how you should entertain such an idea, provided it be a name which you can make known without a blush."

But as the princess thus spoke, a blush did arise, and quickly, too, upon the cheeks of the lady, which Agatha, instantly perceiving, failed not to take advantage of.

"This lady evidently dares not reveal her name," she said. "It will be much better for her to withdraw at once," and this hint, intended indeed as a command, was accompanied by an imperious gesture of the hand.

Now, in real truth, Agatha as senior lady in waiting, was only performing her duty by insisting on the name being given or on the lady's prompt withdrawal. The lady herself seemed to know this full well, and, as the princess remained silent, allowing the affair to take its proper course, she said.

" I crave pardon for this hesitation and delay on my part. Here is my card."

" Lady Prescott," said Agatha, as she glanced at the card which was now handed to her. Then, as a sudden reminiscence struck her, she turned toward the princess and whispered, " This lady is not a fit character to be here. Your Royal Highness will doubtless remember that amongst the list of those who were present at the private theatricals at Carlton House last December — "

" Ah! to be sure, I remember," said her Royal Highness, " the name of Lady Prescott was amongst them. But is not this also the name of one of the ladies belonging to the queen's household? "

" It is so, madam," replied Agatha. Then, in a still lower and more impressive tone, she added, " This lady comes from the camp of your Royal Highness's enemies."

At this moment Emma bent down her head over the princess's shoulder, and said, in a whisper, " Lady Prescott is no longer in the queen's household. I remember reading in the newspaper of her resignation some months ago, and of her being succeeded by Miss Arbuthnot."

" I think also," superadded Agatha, who had just been taking another brief but piercing survey of Lady Prescott, " I think that if her ladyship be not privately married, she at least ought to be."

" Yes," observed the princess, now fixing her eyes also with steadfastness upon Lady Prescott, " beyond all doubt she ought to be married. But, oh, the English court, and those private theatricals at Carlton House," and here her Royal Highness shook her head ominously.

This hurried and whispered colloquy occupied but little more than a minute, during which Lady Prescott remained standing at a distance of about four yards from the garden seat where the princess was placed, and though she caught not a syllable of what was uttered, she nevertheless was at no loss to understand that the observations thus covertly passing concerned herself. Not, however, that she for a moment suspected her actual condition was descried. She had flattered herself that her pregnancy was imperceptible with the dress which she wore and the appliances of art she had put in requisition to conceal her shame. But the keen eyes of Agatha, who had passed through all that process of

concealment and artifice, had not failed to detect the secret, while Lady Prescott herself fancied that the whispered discourse which was going on merely regarded the little bit of scandal that had been coupled with her name in London at the time of her resignation of her situation at court. But still, even this idea, which had previously made her blush ere she revealed her name now made her blush again as she observed those rapid whisperings which were passing amongst the group, and the piercing glances that were flung toward her.

" May it please your Royal Highness," she said, recovering her presence of mind, " I did not at once reveal my name, for fear some prejudice might exist against it. But my mission will be accomplished if you permit me to hand this letter, which is addressed to yourself from your Royal Highness's august sister-in-law and cousin the Princess Sophia."

" I think you would do well, Lady Prescott," interrupted Agatha, " to withdraw. Her Royal Highness even wonders at your audacity in appearing before her in a condition which, had you any feeling of decency, you would have been only too anxious to conceal."

A deadly pallor overspread the countenance of the unhappy Lady Prescott as the eldest Miss Owen thus addressed her in words proving that her secret had indeed been penetrated. But with a desperate resolve to accomplish her mission, she drew forth a letter from her bosom, advanced toward the princess, and said, " Take it, madam, I implore you to take it. Whatever I may be, my shame, my misfortune, cannot alter nor prejudice the contents of this note; and you may judge of its importance by the risk of exposure which I have run in undertaking to be the bearer of it."

" No, her Royal Highness cannot receive anything from your hand," said Agatha, sternly. " Withdraw, madam, withdraw. Every moment that you remain here is an additional insult to her Royal Highness."

" Take care, Miss Owen," retorted the now enraged, almost maddened Lady Prescott, " that the time does not come when your presence shall also be regarded as an insult."

" This is a sheer impertinence," exclaimed Agatha, with the quickness of a hysterical excitement, and from head to

foot she trembled with a mortal terror, as if a thunderbolt had fallen at her feet.

"Give me that letter and begone," exclaimed the princess, sternly addressing herself to Lady Prescott, whose conduct she naturally regarded as a deliberate and wanton insolence toward Miss Owen.

Lady Prescott accordingly handed the letter to the princess and then hurried away, overwhelmed with confusion, and consoled only by the reflection that after having dared so much, and likewise endured so much, she had succeeded in placing Jocelyn's despatch in the hands of her Royal Highness. The page, who was waiting at a distance, hastened to conduct her out of the garden, but ere she quitted the grounds she threw a hasty look back, and beheld the princess with the letter open in her hands.

"She is reading it, she is reading it!" said Lady Prescott to herself, and in the joy now experienced on account of the success of her mission she forgot for the moment the indignity, the humiliation, and the exposure through which she had just passed.

But let us return to the royal group. The moment the Princess Caroline had taken the letter in the manner already described from Lady Prescott, she tore it open, and the envelope she in her haste let fall upon the ground. Agatha stooped, picked it up, and appeared to fold it in an unpremeditated, unwitting manner, while the princess opened the letter which the envelope had contained.

It was the missive from the Princess Sophia, and ran as follows:

"St. James's Palace, London.
"December, 1814.

"My dearest Caroline: — I beg and entreat of you to see the bearer of this, who will explain to you what his object is in approaching you, what he has already suffered in the endeavour to seek you, and how it is that he is compelled to adopt extraordinary means to obtain access to your presence. He bears the name of Jocelyn Loftus, but that is not his real one. This he will reveal to you, together with the reasons which have induced him to adopt the assumed one. On no account be dissuaded from seeing him. That attempts will be made so to dissuade you, I am well aware beforehand, but I entreat you, for your own sake, for

the sake of your dear daughter Charlotte, who knows of the step which is being taken, I entreat you, I say, not to listen to any representations that may be made in order to prevent him from obtaining access to you. Rest assured it is of the highest importance. At all events see him, hear him, and then judge for yourself.

" Ever your affectionate sister-in-law and cousin,

" SOPHIA."

Over the shoulders of her Royal Highness did the sharp eyes of Emma and Julia peruse this letter, while they had all the appearance of standing in respectful attention behind her, so that not even Bergami himself noticed that they were thus scanning their royal mistress's correspondence. As for Agatha, who was standing by the princess, she had been engaged in folding up the envelope in an apparently listless manner, but in reality with the utmost care to preserve it.

" Here is a singular letter," exclaimed the princess. " You may read it, my dear girl," she added, handing it to Agatha, " and I must thank you, by the bye, for the manner in which you ere now vindicated not only the respect due to me, but also the delicacy of our sex with regard to that Lady Prescott. But how could she have become the bearer of this letter, seeing that it speaks of a Mr. Loftus? Moreover, it is dated in December, and this is May. My sister-in-law the Princess Sophia has chosen a somewhat laggard messenger, and the vital importance of the document must have worn itself out over and over again long ere this. But have I not heard the name of Jocelyn Loftus before? " she asked, with the air of one who seeks for a particular reminiscence.

" Assuredly, madam," was Agatha's prompt reply. " Does not your Royal Highness recollect our dear kind friend Mrs. Ranger informing you how grossly we were insulted by that young man whom we took to be a gentleman — or I even think he said he was a nobleman in disguise, did he not, Emma? "

" He did," was the young lady's response. " But you recollect what sad accounts we heard of him, and how he was arrested for travelling under a false name and being a very bad, suspicious character indeed."

" Yes," interjected Julia, " and you recollect, too, how I was compelled to remain behind you in Paris, through illness, and what dreadful things I learned in addition to all you had previously heard — "

" Well, my dear girls," interrupted the princess, " you can set your minds at rest by the reflection that Mr. Loftus does not appear to be forthcoming to seek an audience at my hands. How Lady Prescott could have become the bearer of a letter which it was evidently intended for him to deliver is a mystery beyond all conjecture."

" Who knows," said Agatha, " but that this Lady Prescott is the mistress of the adventurer Loftus? Your Royal Highness may rest assured that he has imposed by some means upon the Princess Sophia, worked upon her credulity, and by his specious tales, as plausible as they are false, induced her to give him that letter of introduction to your Royal Highness? "

" There is a mystery about all this," remarked the princess, a gradual uneasiness arising in her mind, and vague suspicions slowly developing their shadows around her like undefined phantoms dimly seen. " I know not what to think. From all I have heard, the impression made upon my mind relative to Mr. Loftus is certainly of no favourable nature. But then my sister-in-law's letter, so energetically, so emphatically worded, warns me against being dissuaded from seeing him. What does the baron think of all this? "

Thus speaking, she abruptly turned toward Bergami, who, in his usual mood of intellectual pensiveness, had remained all along a silent witness of the whole scene which we have been describing. But he had lost nothing, neither deed nor word, for even when the young ladies were whisperingly directing the princess's attention to Lady Prescott's condition, the baron, placed where he was, could not help overhearing all that was said.

" What is your opinion, I ask," repeated the princess, " upon all these matters? "

" Your Royal Highness is aware that whenever my sentiments are desired, I invariably give them frankly and candidly." Such was Bergami's reply, delivered in a tone replete with the musical mildness of courtesy, but with the accentuation of a manly decision.

" Then I desire you to speak with your usual frankness now," said the princess, both encouragingly and impatiently. " Come, baron, what is your opinion? "

" I think, may it please your Royal Highness," said Bergami, " that if Lady Prescott had been suffered to enter into details, she would have explained any seeming contradictions or anomalies in all this proceeding. For instance, she might have stated how it is that the letter is dated in December and is only delivered in May, how she comes to be the bearer of it, where Mr. Loftus is, and all other particulars. I therefore think, may it please your Royal Highness, that considering this letter emanates from the Princess Sophia, that it addresses you so seriously, and that it adjures you so solemnly, I think, I say, that it would have been prudent to have heard Lady Prescott at greater length, notwithstanding it was indiscreet in the beginning for a lady in her condition to have appeared before you. At all events, if Mr. Loftus be in Geneva, as I think is probable, it would be but prudent to see him."

" Then I have made up my mind how to act," exclaimed the princess, who was entirely a creature of impulse, and, starting abruptly from the garden seat, she added, " Baron, I confide this matter entirely to you, with the request that you lose no time in sifting it to the very bottom. You, as a man, can see Mr. Loftus, whatever be his character; you can hear what he has to say, and judge accordingly. But if he be not at Geneva, then may you probably find out Lady Prescott's abode, and with some suitable apology for introducing yourself to her, ascertain what more she may have to say upon the business which brought her hither ere now. In conducting these inquiries let this letter itself serve as your credential."

With these words the Princess Caroline placed Sophia's despatch in the hands of Bergami, who forthwith took his departure to enter upon the investigation with which he was now charged. The princess then reëntered the villa, followed by the three sisters, who exchanged looks of apprehension and alarm with each other.

" I can now dispense with your attendance until dinner-time," said her Royal Highness to the young ladies, " for I shall retire to my own room and pen a long epistle to the Princess Sophia, who at all events must have been animated

by the kindest possible motives when she wrote that letter which was ere now delivered to me."

Agatha, Emma, and Julia, being thus released from attendance on their royal mistress for the next three or four hours, withdrew to one of their own chambers, to deliberate upon the scene which had ere now taken place in the garden. The moment they were alone together, Agatha produced the envelope which she had picked up and retained, for at the time her quick eye had caught some writing inside the paper as it fell to the ground.

The three sisters now read it in the following terms:

" MADAM: — The undersigned, Jocelyn Loftus, the individual mentioned in the enclosed letter from the Princess Sophia, presents his duty to your Royal Highness, and begs to state that, having suffered an imprisonment of between four and five months at Grenoble, namely, from December until three days ago, he was unable to take any earlier steps toward placing the letter in your Royal Highness's hand.

" He does not now seek a personal interview in the first instance with your Royal Highness, because he is well aware that certain circumstances, which he has to explain, would tend to defeat any such endeavour on his part to approach your Royal Highness.

" He however hopes that the lady who has kindly consented to become the bearer of this letter to your Royal Highness will be enabled to return with a favourable answer to Jocelyn Loftus, so that he may without delay present his homage to your Royal Highness.

" He is at present residing at the house of Doctor Maravelli, a physician and surgeon in the suburb of ———

" In conclusion, he begs that under no circumstances will your Royal Highness permit yourself to be prejudiced against him, no matter from whose lips hostile or calumniating representations may come, for Jocelyn Loftus will be enabled to prove that his motives are utterly free from selfishness, his character unimpeachable, the persecutions he has endured most undeserved, and his aims and objects entirely in the interest of your Royal Highness.

" *Geneva, May 12, 1815.*"

Such were the lines written inside the envelope, and which the three sisters now hastily scanned with frightened looks, blanching cheeks, and palpitating hearts.

"What is to be done?" exclaimed Agatha, in consternation. "Loftus is at Maravelli's — Ah! and now I understand," she half-shrieked forth, as a sudden reminiscence struck her.

"What do you understand?" asked Emma and Julia, both in a breath.

"That allusion which Lady Prescott made," returned Agatha. "Oh, I felt at the time it was something more than a mere random retort, that it was a deliberate taunt flung out full of malignant significancy."

"But how is it possible she can suspect what has happened to you?" demanded Emma, who, as well as Julia, had caught the infection of Agatha's dismay.

"Oh, Maravelli must have penetrated the whole truth," exclaimed Agatha, wringing her hands in despair. "Instead of believing that it was the princess whom he delivered, he must have known that it was me. And he is not making a secret of it, he has told it to Loftus, Loftus has told it to this Lady Prescott, and now Bergami will go and find it all out. O God! exposure is imminent, ruin hangs over our heads!"

Clasping her white hands in despair, the unhappy young lady threw herself upon a sofa in the bedchamber, and gave way to an effusion of the wildest anguish. Julia became equally terrified, and though Emma could not but feel all the danger of her eldest sister's position, and also of her own and Julia's as accomplices in the concealment of the childbirth, she nevertheless showed more presence of mind than they on this trying occasion. She accordingly hurried to Mrs. Ranger's room, where she found that lady very busy in examining a new set of false teeth which had just been sent home by a famous dentist in Geneva. But the hag speedily forgot all about her artificial embellishments when the affrighted Emma hastily sketched the outline of what had occurred within the last hour, and the fearful results which might ensue.

Accompanying Emma to the chamber where Agatha and Julia were sitting in despair upon the sofa, Mrs. Ranger urged them to collect all their fortitude and presence of

mind, so that they might look the present danger boldly in the face if they meant to grapple with it at all.

The old woman and the three young ladies now sat in solemn conclave to deliberate upon the course that was to be pursued, but the more they weighed the perils of their position, the darker seemed the storm-clouds that were gathering around them.

"Now, girls," said Mrs. Ranger, suddenly adopting an air of such stern decision that this nervous, frivolous, affected old woman seemed in a moment to rise high above all her assumed weaknesses and trumpery vanities when the gravity of the occasion demanded the development of her best energies, "now, girls, there is no use in mincing matters, and we must see exactly how we stand. Loftus is our evil genius; he is at Geneva, and the devil has thrown him in the way of Maravelli. They are together, and it is pretty certain that Maravelli has sold our secret to him. Depend upon it, he will ferret out everything, — your accouchement, Agatha, the disposal of the child, and all. Then, even if he should be inclined to show mercy and spare us, that woman whom you have made your mortal enemy — this Lady Prescott, I mean — will expose us pitilessly. This is natural; it will be tit for tat, a woman's vengeance. Well, then, what follows? Concealment of birth is a crime of magnitude in the Genevese republic, — at least two years' imprisonment for the principal, that is yourself, Agatha, and eighteen months for your two sisters and me, besides utter ruin and eternal disgrace for us all. This is the position we are in, and those are the perils which now stare us in the face."

"Good heavens!" murmured the three sisters, clasping their hands, "what is to be done? What is to be done?"

The reader beheld them in the morning, gay, bright, and beautiful, as they stood in the balcony, calling themselves graces and goddesses, and now he may behold them within the walls of that chamber, pale, trembling, convulsed, indeed, from head to foot with the crucifixion of anguish, and suffering mental agonies so acute that even to endure them for a few minutes would appear almost sufficient to turn those dark brown masses of hair silver-white, dim all the lustre of those fine hazel eyes, and render those damask cheeks wrinkled, haggard, and ghastly.

"What is to be done? What is to be done?" they re-

peated, addressing their words in the most piteous accents to Mrs. Ranger, and it was as if three despairing beauties were adjuring some withered witch to work her spells on their behalf.

" What is to be done? " said Mrs. Ranger. " What is to be done? " she repeated, slowly and deliberately. Then suddenly fixing her eyes upon the three young ladies with a look which had a horrible fascination in it, she said, in a deep tone but with accents that trembled not, " Murder must be done, if we would save ourselves."

The three girls, who had been leaning forward, hanging, as it were, upon the slightest syllable to which the hag was to give utterance, started suddenly back as if she had changed all in a moment into a hideous reptile from which they recoiled loathingly, and though ejaculations of horror seemed to waver upon their lips, yet were they stifled ere sent forth.

" Yes, I mean what I say," continued Mrs. Ranger. " But I am not going to ask you to do the murderous deed. No, this Loftus and that Lady Prescott must be removed from our path; but it is Maravelli upon whose fears I will work — yes, 'tis Maravelli," she added, emphatically, " who shall become the executioner for us."

With these words Mrs. Ranger rose from her seat, her eyes remaining fixed with a cold, glistening, reptile-like gaze upon the three girls, who, horror-stricken and dismayed, were huddling together as if in the presence of some spectral shape.

Then, having thus gazed as if to convince them that she was inspired with all the energy now needed for the working out of her desperate plans, Mrs. Ranger hurried from the room with a step as light and swift as that of youthfulness itself, and as the door closed behind her, the three sisters slowly turned their eyes upon each other with looks expressive of a horror beyond all power of description.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CRIME DEBATED

STERN, resolute, and implacable in the purpose she had formed, Mrs. Ranger betook herself direct to the city, and on reaching the neighbourhood of Maravelli's abode, she entered a wine-shop, answering to the description of a London public-house, and desired to be shown to a private apartment. This demand was immediately complied with, and having ordered refreshments, for the sake of appearances, — though Heaven knows she was in no humour to eat, — she likewise directed writing materials to be brought up. Then, having penned a hasty note to Maravelli, she despatched it by the waiter of the wine-shop, whom she charged to answer no questions which might be put to him by any person save the doctor himself.

The man departed to execute his commission, and in ten minutes he returned, followed by Doctor Maravelli, whom he had found at home and who at once hastened to obey Mrs. Ranger's summons.

"My dear madam," said the physician, who had scarcely been able to conceal his agitation in the presence of the waiter, and who now gave free vent to his alarms the moment that individual had quitted the room, "what, in Heaven's name, means this mysterious proceeding? Why not come direct to my house, as usual? Why send for me hither? Ah! madam, a terrible presentiment of evil hangs upon my soul."

"Sit down, sit down," said Mrs. Ranger, whose looks denoted a dark and sinister resolution. "We have much to talk about."

"Good God! your tone and manner frighten me," said Maravelli, sinking upon a seat, as if in a state of exhaustion.

"Would to Heaven I never had anything to do with that business!" and the wretched man writhed in agony upon the chair which he had just taken.

"Fool, idiot, coward!" said Mrs. Ranger, in the thick, husky voice of subdued passion and contempt. "Is it thus that you show a worse than woman's weakness in the presence of tremendous dangers?" and as she spoke she grasped his arm with her bony fingers, and griped it with a force as if it were in an iron vice.

"Dangers!" repeated the wretched man, shuddering with the very endeavour which he made to control his fears. "Ah! I knew there were dangers. I knew it, I knew it, the moment I received your note, so mysteriously sent, and so imperatively summoning me hither."

"Yes, there are dangers," returned Mrs. Ranger, her voice suddenly changing fom the huskiness of passion to the sepulchral depth of solemnity. "But if you are a man, and will show a man's courage, we can avert those perils, whereas if you are weak-minded and show a craven spirit, ruin will overwhelm us all, not ruin for one, but ruin for two, three, all, all concerned. Now do you understand me, and will you be calm?"

"I will, I will," said the doctor.

At this moment the waiter reëntered the room, bearing refreshments and wine, and when he had retired again, Mrs. Ranger rose from her seat and examined the apartment carefully to see whether the walls were merely wooden partitions, or whether they were indeed thick enough to prevent their voices from being overheard in the adjoining rooms. Having satisfied herself on this head, she opened the door gently and looked forth into the passage, but no one was there. Thus convinced that there were no eavesdroppers, she returned to her seat at the table, where Maravelli was just tossing off a tumbler of wine in order to resuscitate his courage and his spirits.

"Now are you prepared to listen?" asked Mrs. Ranger.

"I am," was the response; and he certainly appeared to have found the fortitude which he sought in the juice of the grape.

"Take another glass," said Mrs. Ranger, who saw that the artificial stimulant would render him ductile and pliable

to her purpose, more easily, perhaps, than even her own representations.

"There, now proceed," said the doctor, setting down the tumbler which he had emptied a second time. "I am prepared for something dreadful. Your look, your manner, your tone of voice, already seem to shadow forth some idea of a terrific nature."

"You are aware, doctor," said Mrs. Ranger, "that dangers do menace us, you knew it even before you received my note, and it was my note that worked you up to a pitch of feverish excitement? Come, confess the truth, was it not so?" and she looked him hard in the face, as much as to say that it were useless to give a denial.

"Yes, you speak truly, too truly," returned the doctor, hesitatingly.

"But you have betrayed the trust reposed in you?" she said, still gazing upon him with an intentness and fixity that seemed resolved not to allow the slightest change of feature on his part to escape her notice.

"What do you mean? Betray you?" he asked, stammering and blushing like a guilty man.

"In one word, doctor," said Mrs. Ranger, sternly, and still with that fascinating look fixed upon him, — but fascinating only as the reptile concentrates all the magnetic influence of its cold, gleaming eyes upon the victim it is about to dart upon, — "in one word, you have betrayed all you know to a young Englishman who is living with you, named Jocelyn Loftus?"

"It is useless, utterly useless, nay, even worse than useless," said the doctor, "to deny anything. I will make up my mind to tell you all. Besides, I see that you have some project in view — "

"Remember, doctor, that every minute is precious," interrupted Mrs. Ranger, in a warning voice. "Whatever you have done I will not reproach you for. 'Tis past, and cannot be undone. But it can be amended or counteracted, and in this must you help me. Now proceed, and tell me frankly and candidly all you have said to this Jocelyn Loftus."

Doctor Maravelli thereupon commenced the required explanations. He stated how an English lady, bearing the fictitious name of Roberts, was living at his house, and how,

as she desired change of scene, he had visited the adjacent village to purchase or hire a country residence which he might fit up for her accommodation. He went on to state how he had met Loftus there, how the young man had that same evening rescued Mrs. Roberts from a watery grave, and how he had become an inmate of his house. Then he detailed the particulars of the scene which had taken place between himself and Loftus, and how he had revealed all he knew concerning the incidents of the villa, and likewise Emma Owen's episodical adventure with the police. He next proceeded to describe how, late on the preceding night, Loftus had brought home the corpse of the child, how he had discovered the initials on the flannel wrapper and the cambric handkerchief, and how he had deposited the body in the dissecting-room.

Mrs. Ranger was appalled at the narrative now revealed to her, and which showed how far advanced Jocelyn Loftus was in following up the clue that he was evidently pursuing to the unravelment of the whole complicated affair relative to the birth of the child. But composing her harrowed feelings, and recalling to her aid that more than feminine and even more than masculine resolution with which in her own criminal designs she had previously armed herself, she reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute upon all she had just heard.

"Do you know what this self-styled Mrs. Roberts real name is?" she inquired, at length.

"No," replied Maravelli, "but she has told me that she is a lady of rank, and that she until recently held a situation at the English court. She is a fine, handsome woman, five months advanced in pregnancy —"

"Ah! then it is evidently Lady Prescott," said Mrs. Ranger. "Though I have never seen her ladyship, yet, all things considered, she it must be. Did you notice whether she has been out this morning?"

"Yes, she was absent for upwards of an hour," answered the doctor, "and she had not returned more than twenty minutes when your note was delivered at my house. She looked agitated —"

"Ah! it is the same, then," ejaculated Mrs. Ranger. "A deep, mysterious understanding exists between her and Jocelyn Loftus."

" Methought so," exclaimed the doctor, " for this morning they were alone together in the drawing-room with writing materials, before she went out, and immediately she returned he was evidently waiting about in the hall to receive her."

" Has any visitor called for Mr. Loftus within the last half-hour? " inquired Mrs. Ranger, now thinking of Bergami.

" Yes, a few minutes before your note came," and the physician proceeded to give a description of the royal equerry. " This individual," he added, " was closeted with Mr. Loftus at the moment I left my house. But now, for Heaven's sake, relieve my impatience and tell me what mean all these questions? What has been found out. What perils menace us? "

" Answer me one query first," said Mrs. Ranger. Then fixing her eyes steadily and searchingly upon the doctor, she asked, " Who do you now believe was the mother of that child? "

" From what Mr. Loftus said, and considering all the evidences," answered Maravelli, " I can no longer believe that the princess — "

" Enough! Well, it is useless to sustain the cheat any longer. No, it is useless! Instead of studying how to implicate the princess," she continued, in a musing tone, " the Owens and I must think how we are best to get out of this scrape. Doctor," she went on to say, " Agatha Owen, the eldest of the three sisters, was your patient on that night when upwards of three weeks ago you were introduced to the villa. It matters not now to explain why a cheat was practised on you, and wherefore it was sought to make you believe that it was the princess herself whom you were engaged to assist through the ordeal of maternity."

" But the dangers which menace us, what of them? " asked Maravelli, his impatience, or, rather, his terrors, now once more rising to a feverish pitch. " Who was that handsome man who came ere now to call upon Mr. Loftus? He gave no name, but introduced himself as one having important business."

" It is the Baron Bergami, the princess's equerry," answered Mrs. Ranger. " Have you never seen him before? "

" Methought I recollected his features, but I was not sure," answered Maravelli. " I have been so agitated all

the morning, so full of misgivings and apprehensions after that fearful incident of last night, — I mean the bringing home of that child's corpse, — that my brain has been clouded and my recollections all thrown into disorder. Yes, now I remember, I have seen that handsome man at a distance on one occasion, following the princess's retinue. But what, in Heaven's name, does he seek with Loftus? "

" Lady Prescott, that is, your Mrs. Roberts," resumed Mrs. Ranger, " has been to the villa this morning."

" And all is discovered, all is exposed? " exclaimed Maravelli, trembling from head to foot.

" Yes — no — that is, it will be, and ruin must overtake us all — "

" Then what is to be done? " interrupted Maravelli.

" Hush! not so loud, we shall be overheard."

" But let us fly, let us fly! " hastily resumed the frightened physician. " We will depart together. I will help you to escape, for escape we must. Do you know the penalties which we have incurred? I, branding, yes, branding with a red-hot iron — O God! searing deep down into the flesh, besides imprisonment, and you imprisonment also, and those three girls — oh, it is too horrible to contemplate. Let us fly."

" Fly! Coward, fool! " said Mrs. Ranger, again making use of those epithets of scorn, and again speaking in a voice that was thick and husky. " Whither can we fly? Must we not go with passports? Should we not be traced, pursued, overtaken? "

" True — my God! too true," groaned Maravelli, now wringing his hands in despair.

" Will you be calm? " asked Mrs. Ranger, once more griping him by the wrist, but now shaking him violently. " Look you, I am not cast down, I am not yielding to despair. And why? Because I know that, desperate as are the perils which menace us, they may be averted, counteracted. The game is not altogether in the hands of our enemies. We can yet play it out for ourselves, ay, and win it, too," she added, with a malignant leer.

" Oh, if this be really true? " said Maravelli, clasping in hopefulness the hands which he had a few moments back wrung in despair. " But what makes you think that the dangers can be averted? "

" Because," replied Mrs. Ranger, in a tone of assurance, " I can penetrate to a certain extent the policy which Loftus is pursuing. He does not mean to expose and ruin us fully, unless as a last resource, but he purposes to intimidate, to terrify — "

" Yes, I see," exclaimed the doctor. " If he had really meant mischief he would at once have gone to the police authorities and told all he knew. But what guarantee have we that he will not do so even now before we can possibly adopt any counteractive plan? "

" Rest assured," returned Mrs. Ranger, " that Jocelyn will do nothing of a decisive character for the present moment. Bergami is now with him, you say? Well, there will be consultations, negotiations, intimidations, and so forth. These will spread over some hours. It is now nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, night is not very far distant, and when night does arrive — "

But here Mrs. Ranger stopped short, and her looks simultaneously became so awfully sinister and darkly significant that Maravelli shuddered as if the words which she had yet to speak were already spoken.

" This night? " he murmured, in a scarcely audible voice.

" Yes, this night, Loftus and Lady Prescott must die," rejoined Mrs. Ranger, in a low, deep tone.

" Is there nothing else to be done but that? " asked Maravelli, whose voice had now sunk to a whisper.

" Nothing! " replied the dreadful woman, who was thus inciting him to a deed of darkest horror. " If you would escape branding with a red-hot iron — "

" Enough! " murmured Maravelli, writhing. " I do indeed comprehend that there is no alternative. But Bergami — "

" Leave him to me," answered Mrs. Ranger. " You do your part of the work and I will do mine. Let Loftus and Lady Prescott die this night — mind, this night that is coming, without fail, and I promise that never again shall you hear a syllable of these startling things. Surely you have some subtle poison which you can cunningly mingle with their drink? "

" There are many ways of dealing death," answered Maravelli, " and you may rest assured that I shall adopt the one that is safest."

"Then hasten back now to your own abode," said Mrs. Ranger, "and again I say, if you wish to avoid the searing-iron, flinch not, fail not."

"Loftus and the English lady have but a few hours to live," replied Maravelli, throwing upon Mrs. Ranger a look full of the darkest and most ominous meaning.

He then took his departure from the wine-shop, and Mrs. Ranger likewise issued forth at the expiration of about five minutes. But although she returned in the direction of the villa, she did not immediately reënter it, but walked about at a little distance and in a spot where she might observe the two or three approaches from the city, namely, the main road that passed in front of the house, the shore of the lake, and the by-road which led at the back through the fields, so that she knew that Baron Bergami could not posssibly return to the villa unperceived by her, unless, indeed, he remained out till it was dark. But this she did not anticipate. Astute, deep, and penetrating, she calculated that Bergami would hear from Jocelyn all that the latter had to say, that they would then confer deliberately upon the course to be adopted under the circumstances, but that whatever was resolved upon would be with a view of avoiding scandal and exposure as much as possible for all parties. Mrs. Ranger therefore felt tolerably well assured that after Bergami had seen Loftus he would return direct to the villa, and under this impression was it that she now waited to intercept him in the manner described.

But in the interval we must see what was really taking place between the royal equerry and Jocelyn Loftus.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CONFESSION OF ROMANTIC LOVE

Our hero was in earnest conversation with Lady Prescott, whom we shall no longer call Mrs. Roberts, in the drawing-room at the physician's house, when a servant entered to announce that a gentleman desired to see him on the most particular business. Thereupon Lady Prescott said, "You had better see him here, whoever he may be, for indeed I have a presentiment that it is some one from the royal villa. I will repair in the meantime to Mrs. Montague's chamber and have a conversation with her."

Lady Prescott used the name of Mrs. Montague because she did not know that Jocelyn was aware who this said Mrs. Montague really was. But the truth is that the moment he had seen her that morning he did recognize her, for he had beheld her on the mimic stage that night when circumstances made him a spectator of the private theatricals at Carlton House. But the self-styled Mrs. Montague herself did not know Jocelyn Loftus, nor had she noticed him amongst the spectators, concealed as he was under the gallery, on the occasion referred to. Of course Jocelyn had not appeared to recognize her, but had passed through the ceremony of introduction (which was performed by Lady Prescott) with every semblance of being a perfect stranger and entirely ignorant who she really was. Nevertheless, we must add he had been much astonished at beholding that lady as an inmate of Doctor Maravelli's house.

Having parenthetically recorded these few but necessary observations, we may return to the thread of our narrative.

Jocelyn Loftus, acting upon Lady Prescott's suggestion, desired the servant to show up the gentleman at once, while her ladyship repaired to the chamber of Mrs. Montague.

In a few minutes Baron Bergami was introduced, and on announcing his name, he was welcomed with becoming courtesy by our young hero.

"Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales has commanded me to seek you, Mr. Loftus," began the equerry, "for the purpose of conferring with you."

"In pursuance of the letter which I wrote, and the one which mine enclosed?" said Loftus, whose joy at the progressive success of his plans rendered him impatient to enter upon the requisite explanations.

"The one which you wrote!" observed Baron Bergami, in surprise. Then instantaneously recollecting how Agatha Owen had picked up the envelope, he exclaimed, with an unwonted degree of excitement, "Ah! I understand. You must have written on the paper serving as the envelope of the epistle from the Princess Sophia?"

"I did so," rejoined Loftus, "for I was fearful that if there were several enclosures one might so easily drop or be mislaid."

"Then what you partially apprehended did really occur," continued the baron, "for the envelope was dropped unread, picked up by Miss Agatha Owen, and taken away by her."

"Ah! then perhaps you are unacquainted with its contents?" said Jocelyn, inquiringly; and as Bergami nodded an affirmative to the question, he proceeded to state exactly what he had written in the envelope.

"Now Mr. Loftus," said Bergami, "you will pardon me for telling you, at the very outset of our interview, that your character has been much blackened in the opinion of the Princess of Wales; and this evil impression which she has conceived was not improved ere now by the appearance of Lady Prescott as your messenger, inasmuch as she is in a condition —"

"I have indeed learned from her ladyship's lips how cruelly she was exposed," said Jocelyn. "It may appear indiscreet, improper, and even indecent for me to have entrusted my mission to her ladyship under the circumstances, but I felt assured that I myself could not obtain access to her Royal Highness, I knew not how to forward the Princess Sophia's letter to her with the certainty that it would reach her own hands, and when you have heard all I am about to narrate, you will admit, Baron Bergami, that

the affair is of an importance too grave and too vital to have allowed me to hesitate at any punctilio or formality in my endeavour to convey that document direct to the princess. As for the aspersions on my own character, you shall presently judge of what value they are and what faith is to be put in them."

Jocelyn Loftus then proceeded, circumstantially and minutely, to relate all that he had discovered, all that he had done, all that he had endured, and all that he now proposed to do, in respect to the affairs of the Princess of Wales. He began by stating who he really was, wherefore he had adopted a fictitious name, and why he had abjured his real one. He went on to explain how he had first fallen in with Mary Owen, from whose lips he learned all the particulars of the conspiracy existing against the Princess of Wales, how he had accompanied Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen from Calais to Paris, how he had been the object of their licentious advances, how he had been imprisoned in the prefecture, where Julia had practised her arts under the name of Laura Linden, how he had been rescued from his captivity, how he had returned to England and procured the letter of introduction from the Princess Sophia, how he had set off on a second expedition to the Continent, but had been arrested and imprisoned at Grenoble until within the last few days, how, on obtaining his release, he had sped toward Geneva, and how he had fallen in with Lady Prescott, which circumstance had led to his taking up his abode at Doctor Maravelli's house.

Of course he delicately suppressed the fact that Lady Prescott had attempted self-destruction, and without committing himself to an untruth, he glanced over the event in such a manner which left Bergami to surmise that it was an accidental fall into the water. Continuing his narrative, he related the startling things which he had learned and which had happened since his arrival beneath the physician's roof, describing all that he had elicited from Maravelli, the fishing up of the dead child, and the telltale initials on the flannel wrapper and the cambric handkerchief.

To say that Bergami was amazed, were to say nothing, but to describe him as passing through a strange series of exciting phases of feeling, as Jocelyn successively developed

the incidents of his narrative, were to convey a better idea of the effect which it produced on the equerry. But some parts of the disclosure struck him as if a thunderbolt had fallen at his feet, filling him with stupor and amazement, while others made his blood boil with indignation, and others, again, filled him with horror and dismay. The veil of a tremendous mystery had been drawn aside, and the things that it revealed were startling, surprising, hideous, exciting, revolting, and monstrous to a degree. That the meshes of a dark, deep, damnable conspiracy had been insidiously woven about the Princess of Wales was clear enough; that the three Misses Owen, beneath the air of sprightliness, affability, and good-humour, concealed the blackest hearts, the worst passions, and the most dissolute lives, was also evident; and that they had with a truly fiendlike cunning and with the most exquisite combination of a demoniac duplicity managed to throw upon the princess all the scandal of their own actions was not the less apparent. But while passing through the various stages of successive emotions produced by the fearful narrative which had just been developed, Baron Bergami had experienced an undercurrent of feeling made up of admiration for the excellent young man who had so heroically, so generously, and so nobly devoted himself to the cause of the injured Princess of Wales.

"In the name of her Royal Highness, Mr. Loftus, since by that name you choose to be called," said the baron, "do I thank you, most sincerely, most profoundly, for this chivalrous conduct on your part. Had it not been for you, the fatal web of the most infernal conspiracy the world ever saw would have been so woven about this injured princess that the aims of her enemies must have been triumphantly accomplished in ensuring her disgrace, ruin, and downfall. To you, then, she now owes everything, her honour, which is dearer to her than her life. Pardon me, pardon me, if I speak in terms of excitement, but it is because I am inspired with an enthusiastic admiration of your conduct that I thus give utterance to my feelings."

"I have told you candidly, Baron Bergami," said Loftus, after a few suitable words in acknowledgment of the thanks tendered him by the royal equerry, "that scandal, not content with attributing to her Royal Highness all the profli-

gacies whereof the three sisters have been guilty, has coupled your name with the princess's."

"Heavens!" exclaimed the royal equerry, starting from his seat with indignation and excitement, "no calumny can be more foul, no slander more detestable. Ah! Mr. Loftus, that I have loved her," he continued, "is but too true. When a mere youth, I was appointed secretary to the Prussian envoy at the Court of Brunswick. In the chapel at the ducal palace did I behold the Princess Caroline for the first time, and I believe there can be no sin in confessing that she made a deep impression upon my heart. I loved her, and my love grew into a worship, intense, profound, yet delicate and pure and holy as the love of angels. I thought not of her as a woman, but as a being of a nature infinitely superior to my own. I loved her, in fine, as a visionary may love a shadowy sylph or spiritual wood-nymph in the depths of the forest. That she comprehended my passion is beyond all doubt, and that she reciprocated it, too," continued Bergami, his voice, which was so fine in its masculine melody, now gradually sinking to the lowest flutelike innotations, "is likewise certain. On one occasion she dropped a flower from the ducal pew in the chapel at Brunswick. I picked it up, and placed it next to my heart. No one beheld this little incident, — or, at all events, no one attached any importance to it, save herself, and in her looks, in the blushes too, which rose upon her cheeks, did I read the sentiment of pleasure which this proof of my devotion excited in her heart. Without reflecting on the consequences, without pausing to remember that she never could be mine, and that this love-worship on my part could only lead to misery, disappointment, and despair, I continued to pursue my path of infatuation. I lived only for the moment, and if that moment were filled with the bliss of her image, and lighted by the soft glory of her smile, I cared not what change the next might bring. When I say care not, I am wrong; I should have said, thought not. I was fascinated, enchanted; a spell was upon me. It was not that my vanity was flattered in being thus tenderly noticed by a princess. No, because I boasted of it to no one; it was my own secret. I cherished it in my heart of hearts, enshrined it as the idol of my worship in the sanctuary of my soul. Then, I will not say with the folly of a youthful lover who fancies himself

a poet, because there can be no folly where the sentiment is so pure, so refined, so devoid of selfishness as that which I cherished, but I will say with the indiscretion of a young adorer who pours forth a natural worship to his divinity, I embodied all I felt in rapturous, glowing verse, For, ah! poetry is the language of nature; it is from every grand as well as from every pleasing, interesting, and touching feature in the natural world that the poet drinks in his inspirations. Oh, believe me, he could not create a world of his own from the efforts of imagination unless he were deeply imbued with a sense of all that is sublime, delightful, and lovely in the aspect of nature. For there is poetry in the heavens, when in the gorgeousness of its own light the sun proclaims in golden voice the power of the Eternal, or at night when the moon and stars give forth in silver accents the same adoring hymn. There is poetry in the sea when it speaks in the murmurs of its ripples, or thunders forth in the portentous voice of its sounding billows. There is poetry in the storm, there is poetry in the green fields, the waving woods, and the delicious gardens, and there is poetry of the sublimest and the loftiest character amidst the mountains that rear their heads to heaven, those heads that wear the coronals of eternal snow. Poetry, then, is everywhere; it is the voice in which nature speaks, the mute eloquence which has far more expression and goes more deeply down into the heart than the chorus of ten thousand human tongues. No wonder, then, was it that in the voice of poesy did I seek to convey all those feelings which are so ineffable otherwise. Besides, it was the only manner in which I could communicate with the princess. Nor was it even direct to her that the verses were sent, but it was to one of her ladies in waiting that I enclosed my tender effusions. I knew that this lady's vanity would induce her to show the poems to the princess, and I also knew that the princess would not fail to comprehend them. Nor was I mistaken. The looks with which I was rewarded in the ducal chapel, and the occasional dropping of a flower unperceived by all present save myself, these were the tokens that my verses had been read and were acceptable, these also were my reward."

Here Baron Bergami paused for a few minutes, during which he paced the room in a mood of the deepest abstraction. He forgot who was present, he forgot wherefore he had come

thither, forgot the important topic of discourse whence his own feelings had hurried him divergingly away, forgot everything save the reminiscences which had been thus conjured up, and which came crowding back upon his soul, all absorbing, and with a tenderness that was ineffable. Loftus could not interrupt him, dared not break in upon this reverie, for it was too solemn and sacred for intrusion, although time was now of such importance, and every minute that was slipping away could be so ill spared from earnest deliberation or positive action in the cause of the Princess of Wales.

"This delicious dream," continued Bergami, slowly and mournfully resuming the thread of his discourse, "lasted for nearly eighteen months; and will you believe that during this period never once did I speak to the princess, never were we near enough to each other to exchange a single syllable? I was but the secretary to a second-rate diplomatic agent at a proud court, and although my rank is noble, yet was I never invited as a guest to the ducal table. Suddenly the intelligence began to be whispered about in Brunswick that negotiations had been opened with the British court relative to the marriage of her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Then was I immediately ordered by the Prussian government to quit Brunswick and repair to Vienna, to take the post of secretary to the Prussian legation in that city. By some means the romantic attachment which had sprung up between myself and the princess had become either whispered about or else suspected, and hence my sudden removal to Vienna. Then did I awake from this long dream of bliss, awake to find that I had been clinging to a shadow, immolating my happiness on an ideal altar. Bitterly did I curse my folly in having given way to such a delusion, and yet a delusion it scarcely can be called, for though I had loved so tenderly and had evidently been loved in return, I had not cherished any definite hope. Indeed, I had never thought of asking myself why I loved and to what I expected my love would lead. Thus I had not deluded myself, and assuredly the princess had not deluded me. But I will not attempt to analyze the feelings which I experienced when thus abruptly removed from the Court of Brunswick. I may, however, mention that I at once resolved to renounce

all idea of obtruding myself upon the princess's notice again. Indeed, I prayed, fervently prayed, that she might forget me, so as to be enabled to give up her thoughts wholly and undividedly to the husband whom expediency and diplomacy had selected for her. I heard of her marriage; next I heard that she was unhappy; then I heard that she had given birth to a daughter, and that even this circumstance had failed to endear her royal husband to her. Years and years elapsed. I had opportunities of pushing my way in the world, but my mind had grown too unsettled to allow me to take advantage of them. I abandoned my diplomatic career and joined the Prussian army. Without vanity I can say that the credentials I possess are those of which any military man may be proud. In a short time I rose to the rank of captain, and fought in all the dread campaigns in which Prussia bore her part against Napoleon. But if I had abandoned the seclusion of the diplomatic cabinet in order to fly from thought, I assuredly had gained nothing by the change, for my pursuer followed me through all the mazes of war, even into the ranks of battle. At length the abdication of Napoleon at Fontainebleau and his retirement to Elba gave a short peace to Europe, — that peace which is now to be disturbed again by the wild ambition of this meteor-man whom it is impossible not to admire and gaze up to as the mightiest of warriors, the greatest of heroes, and the grandest of emperors. Quitting the army at the time of the abdication, I visited Italy for my amusement, and some months ago I was suddenly startled by the intelligence that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was travelling in the same country, and was indeed daily expected at the same city where I then was. I was now seized with feelings which I cannot attempt to describe. Suffice it to say that I was impelled by an irresistible power to see the princess. Against this impulse I struggled for several days, but it grew stronger than myself, and, yielding to it, I proceeded to the hotel at which she had taken up her quarters. On sending up my card, I was at once admitted to her presence, and she received me with a frank affability and a warm-hearted candour which seemed to say as plainly as looks and actions can possibly have a meaning, ' I receive you as an old friend. In the name of friendship, welcome. There must be an eternal silence, if not oblivion, with regard to that episode

in our lives which dates more than twenty years back.' I understood her meaning, and a great change was suddenly worked within me. Instead of the restlessness of a disappointed passion, I felt as if I had drunk of the holiest balm of Christian resignation. An anodyne had been all in a moment administered to a heart the wound of which for long years had remained open. Friendship! — to possess the friendship of the princess would now be more than a recompense for all that I had endured; it would make me happy. She appeared to be animated with exactly the same feelings, and treating me in the light of a friend, she inquired what I was doing, how I was engaged, what were my pursuits, and then delicately touched upon my means of existence. With equal candour did I answer her, making her aware that I had nothing but my half-pay as a Prussian officer, and a small pension which I had received in acknowledgment of services rendered during the war. Thereupon she proposed that I should enter her service as principal equerry, that office being at the moment vacant. I accepted the offer, accepted it at once, because it was made so frankly and so kindly. To have refused it, I must have stated some reason, and as I was poor, out of employment, and totally disengaged, I could invent no excuse of a legitimate character. Much less dared I confess that, having loved her in my earlier years, having loved her, too, ever since, and having continued unmarried in order to remain faithful to that romantic love of mine, I dared not accept a post which would constantly retain me about her person. Under these circumstances, therefore, and impelled by such considerations, I at once replied in the affirmative; and behold me installed as equerry in the establishment of that princess whose image had dwelt in my heart for more than twenty years. Now, candidly speaking, Mr. Loftus, I will admit that there was possibly some little indiscretion — "

" Pardon me for interrupting you, Baron Bergami," said our hero, " but I think that you have exculpated yourself from any blame, even the slightest, in respect to taking office in the household of the princess. But that her Royal Highness was somewhat indiscreet in making the proposal to you, I certainly think."

" Consider, Mr. Loftus, that she is of the most artless, unsuspecting disposition," exclaimed Bergami. " Harbour-

ing no guile herself, she is never the first to look for it elsewhere, and her very candour and frankness frequently make her the creature of impulse, so that she is thoughtless in her actions. But, Mr. Loftus," added Bergami, suddenly drawing himself up to his full height and gazing upon our hero with a look of noble ingenuousness, " you will believe me when, as a man of honour, a nobleman, and an officer, I declare unto you that never since I have thus been in the service of her Royal Highness has a single look or word passed between us in any way calculated to revive the memories of the past. Whatever may be felt in either heart is profoundly concealed; nor have I the vanity to suppose that the romantic love of the princess has survived the period when it was characterized by so many singular but delicate traits at the ducal palace at Brunswick. Of this, however, enough. You believe, Mr. Loftus, my solemn word? "

" You need not, Baron Bergami," exclaimed our hero, " do such violence to your own feelings as to enter upon self-vindication in this respect. As for her Royal Highness, not for a moment is it necessary that you should repudiate on her behalf all the vile scandals and atrocious calumnies which have recently been propagated concerning her. From what I have this day narrated, and from all that I have succeeded in learning since the moment I set foot in Geneva, it is clear enough that those three fiends in angel shapes, and bearing the name of Owen, are the authoresses of the scandal, the guilt, and the infamy."

" Yes, true, too true," said Bergami. " But how do you propose to proceed in vindicating her Royal Highness, and punishing the guilty ones? "

" In order to unmask the conspiracy," returned Jocelyn, " we must obtain a thorough insight into all its details, so that every single point at all affecting the character of the princess may be fully cleared up. Now then, let us see what it is that scandal alleges against her. In the first place, it is averred that she has been secretly delivered of a child, but this we shall assuredly be enabled to bring home to Agatha Owen. Secondly, it is declared by calumny that the princess has received several lovers into the villa, but we shall prove that these gallants have been invited thither by the Misses Owen. Thirdly, the tongue of scandal affirms

that her Royal Highness has intrigued with you, Baron Bergami, and that you have been seen proceeding along the passage in the villa at night-time to her Royal Highness's apartment. This point we are not as yet in a condition to clear up. That we know the allegation to be false is one thing, but to make the world believe it so is another. That the scandalous imputation emanates from the Owens, there is no doubt. With them, too, is leagued that mother of crime, Mrs. Ranger, and she appears to have an accomplice in Mrs. Hubbard, who, as I have already told you, bore her part in the adventures of that night when Maravelli was introduced to the villa. It were well then, baron, if you were to demand explanations of this Mrs. Hubbard, and compel her to confess all she knows."

"I will do so," answered Bergami.

"Perhaps," continued Loftus, "her revelations may throw some further light upon the subject. At all events, you have too much sensibility, delicacy, and good taste not to feel how important it is that the particular allegation relative to the princess and yourself should be cleared up."

"I do indeed appreciate the justice and the good sense of all you say, Mr. Loftus," responded Bergami, "and, depend upon it, I will do my best to exonerate her Royal Highness from that gross and scandalous imputation."

"In this respect, then, I must leave you to act according to circumstances," said Loftus. "Meanwhile I shall not remain idle. For you must understand that although we have every reason to suppose it was indeed Agatha Owen who gave birth to the child, we are not yet in a condition fully to prove it. That her sister Emma disposed of the corpse in the lake is beyond all doubt, and that it was wrapped in a garment belonging to Agatha is equally certain. But still these evidences do not place the main point beyond all doubt. It might still be alleged that as the Misses Owen were in the confidence of the princess, those little circumstances just mentioned were natural enough. It is therefore necessary to obtain a confession from the lips of the sisters, and this cannot be elicited from them by suasion or remonstrance, no, nor even by mere threats and menaces of exposure. All these they have no doubt firmly made up their minds to dare and defy. It can therefore only be under extraordinary circumstances of terror, best cal-

culated to make a sudden and awful impression upon the mind, to give the mind, indeed, a sudden shock, and unnerve it by the abrupt development of a spectacle of horror, — it is only by such means as these, I say, that a full and complete confession can be extorted from the lips of those three depraved and heartless young women. Now, Baron Bergami, do you begin to understand why I have retained the loathsome corpse of that child beneath this roof, why I have deposited it in the dissecting-room as the most fitting place for such an object to be viewed?"

"Yes, I understand your motives now," answered Bergami. "You purpose by some means or other to entice the three sisters hither."

"Such is my object," replied Loftus. "Had I personally been sent for by the princess to-day, as I had hoped would be the result of Lady Prescott's visit, I should have contented myself for the moment by revealing to her Royal Highness enough to place her at once upon her guard as a preliminary to the complete revelation of all details when my plans are matured. I should then have sought a secret opportunity of inducing the three sisters, by means of dark and mysterious threats, to come to Doctor Maravelli's house this night. But now, from the turn which events have taken, these results must be brought about through other means. In plain terms, Baron Bergami, it is now for you to enter actively into coöperation with me in carrying out my aims. To you, then, must I entrust the task of inducing or compelling the three sisters, Agatha, Emma, and Julia, to come hither this night!"

"I will do so," was Bergami's prompt reply.

"Good!" ejaculated Loftus. "Now then, let us understand each other thoroughly. At midnight punctually the three sisters must be at the front door of this house, for midnight is the hour when the mind, by a variety of influences and associations, is most sensitive to the overpowering effect of circumstances of horror."

"At midnight," rejoined Bergami, "those three young women shall be at the front door of Maravelli's house, — at least, so far as it will depend upon myself to urge, coerce, or persuade them. As a matter of course, no means must be left untried. If I find that they are more accessible to cajolery than to threats, I will use the former; but, at

all events, I will do my best to ensure their presence here."

"I shall rely upon you," said Loftus, "for remember how much depends upon the success of this feature in our plan, and how vitally important it is to wring from those girls the whole truth relative to the child, so as to relieve the character of the princess from so serious an aspersion."

"I appreciate and understand all you say," remarked Bergami, "and I shall now speed back to the villa to perform the part which you have entrusted to me."

"But be careful, baron," said Loftus, "in what you may reveal to the princess. It would be unwise to tell her everything at once. These are things that should only be broken by degrees, for they are but too well calculated to prove overpowering to a sensitive mind."

"This suggestion on your part shall I also follow," said Bergami. "Indeed, I will so manage matters that the princess shall not at once be plunged into an inordinate degree of excitement. Moreover, it will perhaps be as well that the Misses Owen should not be allowed to perceive how very serious matters are becoming, lest they should hesitate to come this night to Maravelli's house to see you."

After a little additional discourse upon the details of the plan now in execution, Baron Bergami took his leave of Jocelyn Loftus, and, quitting the house, he retraced his way in the direction of the villa.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PRINCESS — MRS. HUBBARD

While pursuing his path homeward, the baron was suddenly aroused from a reverie of a deep, absorbing, and painful character by hearing his name mentioned. He looked up, and beheld Mrs. Ranger.

This lady had never been a favourite of Bergami's. Not that he was a man who formed opinions without a motive, or who easily surrendered himself up to prejudices and antipathies, but he certainly had never been inclined to entertain a high opinion of Mrs. Ranger. Now that he had discovered from Jocelyn's revelation that she was a perfect Hecate of iniquity, he recoiled with a sudden sensation of loathing as he thus found himself in her presence. But almost at the selfsame instant did the thought flash to his mind that he might to some extent make use of this woman, in respect to the purpose which he had in view relative to the Owens, and conquering his repugnance accordingly, he acknowledged her salutation.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Ranger immediately saw that the baron felt a loathing at her presence, and that even this act of courtesy which he had just performed, reserved, constrained, and cold as it seemed, was a forced effort and not a spontaneous politeness.

"Something unpleasant has occurred, baron," she said, accosting him in such a manner as to show she desired to lead him into conversation.

"Yes, Mrs. Ranger," responded Bergami, fixing his eyes with a look of deep meaning upon her, "something unpleasant has indeed occurred."

"You have seen Mr. Loftus and Lady Prescott?" asked Mrs. Ranger, eagerly.

" I have not seen Lady Prescott since she was at the villa ere now, but I have seen Mr. Loftus. How knew you that he was at Geneva? "

" Now, baron," said Mrs. Ranger, hastily, " do not let us stand here wasting precious time in asking questions and trying to draw each other out. But tell me at once the amount of mischief that exists and how it may be remedied. Do everything you can to avoid scandal, and I will give my best assistance in any way that lies in my power."

" Well, then, to speak with equal candour," answered Bergami, " I will tell you that there is a considerable amount of mischief suspected and into the depths of which Mr. Loftus and I are determined to penetrate. Your three young friends, the Misses Owen, are implicated."

" Ah! poor dear creatures! " ejaculated Mrs. Ranger. " But remember how young they are, and make allowances for them. You would not seek to ruin them? Spare them; at all events, give them time to reflect upon the atonement they may make for any amount of mischief they have already done."

" Now, Mrs. Ranger," said Bergami, " I do not wish to proceed with unnecessary harshness or precipitation, and I think you are aware of Mr. Loftus's disposition."

" Ah! he is a kind, good, excellent young man," said Mrs. Ranger. " But what does he mean to do? What course is he adopting? Perhaps he believes that the poor girls are far more guilty than they really are? "

" To give you a proof that he does not wish to act with cruel abruptness or unfeeling precipitation," said Bergami, " I will at once inform you that he desires to have an interview with these young ladies, to reason with them, to learn from their own lips the extent of their misdeeds, and to see in what manner scandal may be avoided. In a word, he has consented to see them, and has left it to me to make some appointment with them to that effect."

" Shall I bear a message to them for you, baron? " asked Mrs. Ranger, inwardly chuckling at the certainty which she now acquired that no immediate step was to be taken with regard to the fearful matters wherein she, as well as the Owens, was so mixed up. " Or would you prefer seeing them at once yourself? It were perhaps better — "

" Yes, it would be better," said Bergami, adopting a

musing tone, as if he deliberated upon the point, instead of having already made up his mind to it. Then consulting his watch, he said, " It is now past three o'clock. Tell the young ladies that, in order to avoid unpleasant observation, I will meet them at five punctually on the shore of the lake — near that old jetty which we see yonder," he added, after sweeping his eyes around in search of a specific place of appointment.

" Your message shall be faithfully delivered, and I promise you the girls shall be punctually there. But may I hope, indeed, am I to understand from the remark you have just made, that you do not purpose to vex and annoy our dear princess — "

" Madam," interrupted the baron, sternly, for the mingled hypocrisy and effrontery of the woman was more than he could patiently endure, " you must be well aware that I have learned too much to believe for a single instant that you or the three sisters have any regard, love, or pity for the princess. Nevertheless, madam, I do not object to inform you that it is my intention to deal delicately, warily, and cautiously with her Royal Highness in respect to the terrible things which have come to my knowledge. I will even add that provided the Misses Owen follow in all things the course which I shall presently point out to them, they shall, at least until to-morrow, be guaranteed against exposure to the princess."

" Ah! this is most kind, most considerate on your part," exclaimed Mrs. Ranger. " But, my dear baron, will you not tell me exactly how matters stand — "

" I have no more to say at present," interrupted the royal equerry, with a coldness and sternness that precluded any further observation on the harridan's part. " We are both about returning to the villa," he added, " but there are different paths to reach the same point."

Thereupon he quickly passed Mrs. Ranger by, and hastened along the main road toward the villa, while she took the path across the fields.

For the present we will follow Bergami, who, on reaching the villa, immediately sought the princess, and this was the first time he had found himself alone with her since he had been in her service. She was in a parlour the window of which opened on the lawn in front of the house, and com-

manded a magnificent view of the lake and all the surrounding scenery. But to the beauties of nature her attention was not given, though her eyes were fixed thereon, for the incident of noon had troubled her sorely, and the longer she meditated upon it the greater became her misgivings and her alarms.

"Ah, baron, I am so glad you have returned," she exclaimed, the moment he entered the room. "Having written a long letter to my dearest daughter Charlotte, and another to my sister-in-law Sophia, I came and shut myself up alone in this room to think in solitude. Ah! and thinking is ofttimes so mournful, so sad, especially when aught has arisen to fill the mind with new apprehensions, fresh misgivings. But what have you done? Whom have you seen? Speak, tell me; I am in a flutter of excitement."

"I cannot obey your Royal Highness so speedily," said the baron, with the profoundest respect. "Indeed, considering what I have heard, I think it would be far more prudent if your Royal Highness would restrain your impatience until to-morrow, and then I shall be better enabled — "

"But tell me, am I menaced by any danger?" asked the princess, with a visible tremor.

"No, madam, solemnly and sacredly, no."

"Then is my mind at once set at ease," rejoined the princess, her looks instantaneously brightening up, "and you may either tell me as much as you choose to unveil, or nothing at all, if you prefer I should wait until to-morrow. I know that you are my friend, baron, and therefore I place unlimited confidence in you."

Bergami bowed, saying, in a voice which betrayed the deep emotion that he felt, "Depend upon it, madam, I will never betray the trust with which you honour me."

As he thus spoke, with his looks cast down, a sigh, an ill-subdued and but half-stifled sigh, fell upon his ear, but scarcely more audibly than the seared leaf of autumn, when falling from the tree, kisses the ground beneath, and like that seared leaf cast off from the withering tree was the sigh thus thrown from the princess's heart.

"Then you have seen Lady Prescott again? Or you have seen Mr. Loftus?" she immediately exclaimed, in a hurried manner, and scarcely knowing what she said, so tumultuous

were the feelings which had suddenly arisen up in her soul.

"Yes, madam," responded Bergami, who all in a moment had regained his wonted presence of mind, for he saw the precipice upon which they both stood and hastened by the ceremonial courtesy of his manner to raise up again the barrier of etiquette which had been for an instant borne down by the strong gush of feeling fresh from the heart's fountains. "Yes, madam, I have seen Mr. Loftus, and permit me at once to inform your Royal Highness that a more chivalrous, high-minded young man than he breathes not the air of this world. As for the aspersions thrown out against his character, they are nought but the vilest calumnies."

"Then the Owens have deceived me, and Mrs. Ranger has deceived me?" cried the princess, with mingled anger and amazement.

"You have been deceived, madam, and duped in many, many ways," responded Bergami. "But the crisis is now come, and, thanks to this much maligned but really virtuous and admirable Jocelyn Loftus, your enemies will succumb and you shall achieve a proud triumph. More than this I would rather not say at present, and it were also well if your Royal Highness would assume your usual demeanour, and not allow those around you to perceive that anything extraordinary is taking place."

"I will follow your counsel, baron, in all things," she answered.

Bergami then bowed, and at once quitted the apartment without raising his eyes toward the princess.

Ascending the stairs, he reached the second story and made straight for Mrs. Hubbard's room, where he found her solacing herself with a little drop of brandy after the fatigues of ironing and starching all the morning up in the laundry. On observing the royal equerry, she sprang from her seat, curtseyed, and made a rush at the bottle to hurry it off to the cupboard which stood open behind her; but Bergami, closing the door at once, assumed a stern air, saying, "Put yourself to no trouble, woman, on my account, but answer me the questions I am about to address you."

Mrs. Hubbard was sadly frightened at these words, accompanied by so peremptory and even menacing a manner on the part of Bergami, and sinking back in her seat, she

gazed up at him with a stolid amazement that would have been ludicrous enough if he were in any humour to enjoy it.

But it is not our intention to give at length and in detail all that passed between the baron and Mrs. Hubbard on the present occasion. Suffice it to say that he opened his business with her by the assurance that if she told him the truth in respect to certain matters that had transpired, he would hold her harmless, but if she acted with duplicity or falsehood, he would punish her most severely. Having already suspected from the very first moment Bergami began speaking that his visit was in some way connected with recent occurrences, she grew terribly alarmed, and fell upon her knees, declaring that whatever part she took in the affair of the memorable night three weeks back was through love of the princess, whose honour she wished to save.

Thereupon Bergami bade her rise, made her resume her seat, and ordered her to tell him all she knew. She fell to crying and sobbing, and saying that if she had watched at her door at different times and seen him stealing along the passage at night, it was only because Mrs. Ranger had told her what was going on and had put it into her head thus to play the spy.

It was now Bergami's turn to be astonished, for he knew full well that it was not himself who had been seen creeping stealthily along the passage in the manner described. On questioning and cross-questioning Mrs. Hubbard, he found that she adhered to her story without contradiction or prevarication, and he now began to comprehend that the conspiracy must have had a phase of which he and Jocelyn Loftus had hitherto little dreamed. In plain terms, he saw that somebody must have personated him, in order the more effectually to work out the detestable purpose of involving the princess's reputation in irretrievable ruin.

That he had been so personated by some one was a suspicion speedily confirmed by several little circumstances which he elicited from Mrs. Hubbard. For instance, Mrs. Ranger had never allowed her to peep forth long enough to satisfy herself that the individual personating him really entered the room of the princess; and, moreover, the personator was invariably dressed in a frock coat, never in an evening costume, although it was at night-time when the

said personator was wont to appear. Mrs. Hubbard likewise mentioned that, now she came to think seriously upon the matter, she had more than once fancied at the time that the person whom she took for Baron Bergami always looked shorter than he really was.

But now there was another phase in the tremendous conspiracy which Mrs Hubbard revealed to the baron, and this was that on two occasions when she had been induced by Mrs. Ranger to peep forth from her room, she had seen the princess herself introducing a paramour along the passage. Astonishment for a minute prevented Bergami from uttering a word; but when he was enabled to question her, he found that she consistently and positively pledged herself to having seen her Royal Highness on two consecutive occasions approaching up the passage, in company each time with a male stranger. When asked how she knew it was the princess, Mrs. Hubbard replied that it was because she wore the satin cloak bordered with ermine and the green silk hood which she was wont to put on of an evening, and which it was impossible to mistake.

The baron could scarcely restrain his indignation on hearing these details, which gave him so much more profound an insight into the ramifications of the fearful conspiracy. That he and the princess had alike been personated on different occasions was beyond all question, because not for an instant did he believe that her Royal Highness had been guilty of the thing imputed to her. Indeed, so furious was the rage which boiled up in the breast of Bergami that he could scarcely prevent himself from rushing forth and at once surrendering the three sisters, together with Mrs. Ranger, to the authorities of Geneva. But recollecting how necessary it was to adopt the cautious and prudential course recommended by Jocelyn, he put a curb upon his passion and restrained his feelings as well as he was able.

He saw plainly enough that Mrs. Hubbard was a dupe and not an accomplice, and that Mrs. Ranger and the Owens had so contrived matters, with the most exquisite refinement of satanic ingenuity, as to make her a witness of the supposed guilt of the princess. The baron therefore lost no time in disabusing the woman's mind.

"Mrs. Hubbard," he said, "I came to this apartment under the impression that you were an accomplice in a

fearful conspiracy, but I now perceive that you are its dupe. This conspiracy has been concocted for the ruin of your royal mistress. You have never seen me in the passage, as you state, but some one who has personated me, nor have you ever seen the princess in the condition which you have described, but some one personating her. To such an extent has the fiendlike imaginativeness of these wretches gone. Ah! you may well hold up your hands in amazement, but let me tell you that all is discovered, even to the fact that it was Agatha Owen herself, and not the princess, who gave birth to a child within these walls, — that child whose corpse you have had in your arms. And now I am reminded," added Bergami, " that those two gentlemen whom you saw at Lausanne, Colonel Malpas and the Earl of Curzon, for such were their names, were the paramours of Emma and Julia Owen, and doubtless they were the same two individuals whom you saw introduced to the villa by the wearers of the ermine cloak and silken hood."

Mrs. Hubbard was astounded at all she thus heard, as well indeed she might be; but she was no longer frightened on account of herself, for Bergami's manner had undergone an entire change toward her from the moment he found she was a dupe and not an accomplice. He spoke kindly and encouragingly, reiterating his assurance that no harm should befall her. He also bade her maintain the profoundest silence relative to this interview which he had with her, until the time came when she would be required to speak out and tell all she knew. Mrs. Hubbard promised most faithfully to comply with these instructions, and the baron then took his departure from her chamber, more than ever astounded, afflicted, and indignant at the atrocious measures set on foot to ruin the Princess of Wales.

We must now return to Mrs. Ranger, who in the meantime had also reëntered the villa.

Proceeding straight to the apartment where she had left the sisters two hours before, she found them still there in no very enviable state of mind.

The moment she made her appearance, they started up, rushed toward her, and with their eager looks, more than with their hurried words, showed the intense anxiety which filled their hearts.

"Tranquillize yourselves, girls, tranquillize yourselves," she said in an encouraging tone. "The evil is tremendous, but the danger may be surmounted."

The young ladies were somewhat soothed by her words, but still the anodyne thus conveyed was incommensurate with the frightful lacerations which poignant terror had inflicted upon their souls. Despite, too, the somewhat sanguine manner in which Mrs. Ranger had just announced that there was a loophole of escape from their embarrassments, they were now compelled to pass through another fearful phase of excitement when the old hag circumstantially narrated to them all that had taken place between herself and Maravelli. Heavens! how did the hearts of the three sisters sink within them, and what terrible feelings took possession of their souls, as they heard how Jocelyn Loftus was pursuing the track of his investigations, how he had extorted all the physician's secrets, how he was acquainted with all the adventures of the memorable night at the villa, and how he had the very corpse of the child fished up from the depth of the lake. At one moment so sudden a faintness seized upon Agatha — for Mrs. Ranger was not overnice or delicate in giving the particulars of the narrative as she had heard it from Maravelli — that had not strong restoratives been applied she would have fallen into a swoon. By means of a powerful cordial, however, she was inspired with that artificial energy which is only enjoyed to the prejudice of health's natural vigour, in the same way that opium and alcohol prey upon the constitution which they either lull into dreamy bliss or raise into ecstasy.

"Now, my dear girls, you know the worst," said Mrs. Ranger, "and it is time I should tell you the best. I waylaid Bergami as he returned from Maravelli's house. He of course knows all, but it is quite clear that neither he nor Loftus proposes to have recourse to harsh measures immediately. Their aim is intelligible enough; they mean to get together all the information they can and clear up every point which is at all mysterious or perplexing, before they make the grand exposure. Now, then, we have breathing time; we have the rest of this day before us, and all to-night."

"Good heavens! then to-morrow the exposure may come?" exclaimed the sisters, clasping their hands in despair. "Oh, let us fly, let us fly!"

"Foolish girls! how can you fly?" demanded Mrs. Ranger. "Without time to get passports made out, we should be arrested as suspicious fugitives. No, no, flight is impossible. We must remain and dare it all."

"But we have but a few hours before us," exclaimed Julia, shuddering.

"And in those few hours an immensity may be done," rejoined Mrs. Ranger. "Bergami desires to see you all three at the jetty at five o'clock. You must go. It is for the purpose of making another appointment for you elsewhere, and this other appointment is with Loftus, which you must also keep."

"What! see Loftus, after all he knows?" cried Agatha, in dismay. "Is he not aware that I have been delivered of a child? Is not the very corpse of that child in his possession?"

"Oh, it becomes you admirably to play the shamefaced and the prude," cried Mrs. Ranger, scornfully, "you who did all you could to win him to your arms in Paris, displaying all your beauties with the luxuriousness of a wanton — "

"Enough, enough!" said Agatha, biting her lips at the taunt. "If you think it necessary that we shall see Loftus, we will do so."

"Yes, necessary indeed!" replied Mrs. Ranger. Then, in a deeper tone, she added, "It is necessary, because it may save the necessity for three murders."

"What mean you?" demanded Emma, in horror and dismay, as it instantaneously struck her that the dreadful old woman was now alluding to Bergami as well as to others.

"I mean," rejoined Mrs. Ranger, speaking with the firmness of a cold and implacable decision, "that there are three enemies whom we have now to fear. This morning there were two, Loftus and Lady Prescott, but within the last few hours Bergami has been added. Well, then, if Loftus mean to propose some terms and conditions that will avoid the necessity of exposure, and if an avenue of safety be open to us all, then will it be unnecessary to do the work of death. But if, on the other hand, the result of your interviews with Bergami and Loftus respectively should prove that exposure must ensue, that we are not to be spared, and that punishment is intended us, then must Loftus, Lady Prescott, and Bergami all three die this night."

The girls shuddered from head to foot, but Emma's shuddering, as Mrs. Ranger mentioned the name of Bergami, was even more agonizing and convulsive than that of her sisters. But she said nothing, only fell immediately into a profound reverie.

"Methought," said Agatha, in the low, hushed tone of terror, to Mrs. Ranger, "that you had already agreed with Doctor Maravelli — "

"Yes, that Loftus and Lady Prescott are to die," returned the woman, "but I did not then foresee that Jocelyn would desire to have an interview with you. His doing so looks conciliatory, or, rather, I should say, as if he meant to be merciful. In this case his death will answer no good purpose, will be unnecessary. Therefore, after the interview with him to-night, wherever it may take place, it will be for you, Agatha, to judge whether it is safe to let him live, or whether our interests require that he should die. If he is to live, then must you find the opportunity of breathing the word to Maravelli, but if he is to die, then nothing need be said, and the doctor will do his work."

"You argue as if you expected that the interview between us and Loftus," said Agatha, "is sure to take place at Maravelli's house? "

"I believe so, from what Bergami said. However, he will let you know all about it presently, and we shall be perhaps better able to decide how to act. But mind," continued Mrs. Ranger, emphatically, "that whatever our purpose be, our resolution must be bold and inflexible; whatever we determine upon must be carried out to the very letter. Consider how much depends on all this. Is it not better to dare everything, sooner than suffer ourselves to be dragged away to a felon's gaol? I am half-inclined to believe," she added, in a very low whisper, to Agatha, a whisper which she alone heard, "that Emma has become spoony with respect to Bergami. Look into what a mood of abstraction she has fallen, and Julia, too, gazing listlessly upon her — "

"Yes," whispered Agatha, "Emma is indeed in love with Bergami, and I think that the feeling already amounts to an infatuation."

"Ah! if Bergami were a man to be tempted," said Mrs. Ranger, thoughtfully, "he might be won over by Emma's

seductiveness to serve our purposes. We might make use of him to persuade Jocelyn Loftus to pardon us, ay, and even to shield us from any evil consequences — "

" Yes," interrupted Agatha, catching hopefully at the idea, or, rather, we should say desperately, " why should not Bergami be won to Emma's arms? Is he not a mortal of flesh and blood, and is it at all likely he will prove another Jocelyn Loftus? No, no; by those dark expressive eyes, by his whole aspect, Bergami is not a saint, like Jocelyn."

" Then I tell you what must be done," said Mrs. Ranger, still speaking aside with Agatha. " You shall all three keep the appointment with Bergami at five o'clock, and when you have heard what he has to say, do you and Julia leave Emma with him on some pretence. Of course you can tell Emma presently that you are going to do so. She will doubtless be well pleased, and your ingenuity, Agatha, will not fail to devise some feasible excuse for so leaving them together."

Agatha nodded assent to the suggestions which Mrs. Ranger so artfully threw out, and as the hour to keep the appointment was now approaching, the three young ladies proceeded to attire themselves in their walking apparel.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SIREN'S WILES

PUNCTUALLY at five o'clock Baron Bergami repaired to the trysting-place on the shore of Lake Leman, and there, close by the jetty, did he find the three sisters waiting for him. They were pale, and had evidently been most painfully excited; indeed, as he approached them, their agitation was visible enough, notwithstanding their efforts to look composed and even assume an air of confidence.

Bergami had no pity for them. He felt shocked at the thought that three such lovely creatures, so eminently endowed by nature, should possess hearts so black, and that such fair exteriors should serve as a veil to hide so much profligacy and dissoluteness. Alas! what charming skins do some snakes wear! What dazzling hues appear upon the sinuous forms of those serpents whose touch is death!

Yes, Bergami felt shocked as he thought of the depravity of these three young women whom nature had made so beautiful, and he even experienced the suffocating sense of a sudden indignation as the incidents of the ermine cloak and the personation of himself rushed with vivid effect to his memory. But subduing any outward expression of his emotions, and shrouding whatsoever he felt beneath a calmly dignified demeanour, he made the usual salutation of courtesy as he approached.

His manner, though so reserved and distant, almost to sternness, nevertheless somewhat revived the spirits of the three sisters, for they had almost expected that he would accost them with immediate upbraidings and reproaches. Emma, especially, regained much of her lost fortitude and assurance, and flinging a second glance, from beneath the rich dark fringe of her eyelids, on the calm, pensive, and

mournful features of the baron, she thought to herself, " Oh, if I could conquer him with the artillery of my fascinations, if I could but enmesh him in the web of my seductive snares, we should be saved, we should be saved! "

And as this thought sent a thrill of hope through her entire frame, rousing at the same time some of that natural passion which had sunk sluggish and almost dead under the weight of recent horror, a tint of the fled carnation came back to her cheeks. Bergami noticed this, noticed also the quick and sidelong glance which she had flung upon him, and felt some suspicion of the truth arising in his mind. For Jocelyn had given him some insight into the Circean blandishments and siren wiles which the sisters had practised toward himself in Paris, and thus he was not altogether unprepared for any such display of feminine seductiveness that might be aimed at his own heart.

" Young ladies," he said, without appearing to notice what we have just described, " it is necessary that I should have a few minutes' conversation with you upon a painful, most painful subject. I did not choose to convey to you through Mrs. Ranger all that I wished to say, because I was fearful that she might not deliver my message aright, or that if she did, she might attempt to dissuade you from acting in accordance therewith. Hence my object in seeking this interview, and we who have so often roamed along the banks of Lake Leman as friends, while attending upon our royal mistress, must now tread in the same steps with far different feelings. Lest we should be observed, we will not remain standing in this particular spot. We will walk a little way along the shore, and I beg you will give me your earnest attention."

The party accordingly turned away from the jetty, and began following the course of the lake's margin. Agatha and Julia walked on Bergami's right hand, and Emma on his left, but we need hardly state that he did not offer them his arm. The sisters were, however, still more cheered by his words than they had previously been by his looks, for what he had said seemed uttered in sorrow rather than in anger, and in a tone of deep lament rather than of harsh upbraiding.

" You are aware," he continued, " that I have seen Mr. Loftus. Mrs. Ranger has no doubt told you so, and from

his lips have I heard many, many painful things. Indeed, if all good feeling be not extinguished within you, and at your age I can scarcely believe it possible that you are so thoroughly inured to crime as to be able to contemplate its paths backward without remorse, and forward without fear — "

" No, no, we are not so bad as all that," cried Emma, suddenly catching him by the arm, while her bosom appeared to be wrung with convulsive sobs.

" God grant that what you say may be true," exclaimed Bergami, " but you must all three feel, if you feel anything at all, that an immense atonement is required for the misdeed whereof you have been guilty. That you could not have naturally become so wicked, so very, very wicked, is certain, and that therefore you have been rendered so by a shocking course of training, is equally positive. Indeed, that such was the case I have heard from Mr. Loftus, who, as you are well aware, learned all particulars concerning you from your sister Mary in England. For these reasons, therefore, — I mean, viewing you as the instruments that a hideous system of training rendered pliant and ductile with a sort of plastic art to the purposes of the archfiends who are in England, — both Mr. Loftus and myself are inclined to hold that there is some little extenuation for you. At all events, this is the merciful and compassionate view which Mr. Loftus has thought fit to take of the whole tenor of your conduct, and I do not wish to differ from him. Therefore was it that I commenced by speaking of atonement."

" Ah! show us what atonement we could make," said Emma, the words coming apparently clothed in a gush of fervid feelings from the heart, " and you know not how cheerfully we will follow your commands."

" Yes, and gratefully, too," said Agatha, with a voice into which she likewise threw as much feeling as possible.

" If we could only live the last few months over again," added Julia, " all this would not happen."

" Most sincerely do I hope," continued Bergami, " that these averments of contrition come from the depths of your hearts. But it is not to me that you should say all this; it is not to me that you are to promise atonement. It is to Mr. Loftus, that young man who is as generous as you

have represented him to be base, who is as noble-hearted as you have depicted him to be depraved, who is as high-principled as you have painted him profligate and dissolute, — it is to him, I say, that you must repeat all you are now saying to me. Indeed, Mrs. Ranger has no doubt informed you that Mr. Loftus requires an interview with you this night. Do you feel disposed to visit him at Doctor Maravelli's house? "

" Maravelli's? " ejaculated Agatha, in a voice of unfeigned horror, as she thought of the dead child, her child, which was there, beneath that roof.

" Yes, at Doctor Maravelli's," responded Bergami, " and not only at his house, but likewise at the solemn hour of midnight. All three of you must be there; not one must remain away upon any pretence. Do you understand me, and do you agree? "

" Oh, yes, we accept everything that falls from your lips, as if from the arbiter of our destiny," exclaimed Emma, still in that fervid tone of feeling which she knew so well how to assume. " For my part, I swear to be there."

" And I also," said Julia, " if it will ensure us mercy and forbearance at the hands of Mr. Loftus and yourself."

" Then assuredly I cannot hesitate to declare in the affirmative likewise," added Agatha, in a faint voice.

" It is understood, then," said Bergami, " and I warn you against any hesitation or any neglect in fulfilling the pledge which you have all three given. Ye will go alone through the silence of the night, there are no dangers to apprehend, and ye doubtless know the way thither. Do not attempt to fly from Geneva. I warn you that such an endeavour will prove ineffectual, for I would have you pursued ignominiously, brought back, and mercilessly handed over to punishment."

" I can assure you, oh, I can assure you most positively," said Emma, again catching his arm as if by an involuntary impulse, and looking up into his face with an expression of frightened, deprecating, piteous entreaty, " that we will obey you to the very letter. Do not, do not mistrust us altogether. Everything that we can do now by way of atonement for the past shall be done."

" Yes, Emma," exclaimed Agatha, " plead our cause with Baron Bergami. I am at a loss for words to express all I

feel, but you have greater fortitude than I. Come, Julia, let us leave Emma as our advocate."

Thus speaking, the eldest sister turned abruptly away, accompanied by Julia, and speeding along the shore, without once looking back, they thus retraced their steps toward the jetty.

So suddenly was this manœuvre accomplished, that Bergami, though naturally cool and self-possessed, was taken completely aback, and he could not utter a word; but almost instantaneously penetrating the stratagem, he allowed it to take its course, thus appearing to fall a dupe to the pretence adopted for the purpose of leaving Emma alone in his company.

" Now, what have you to say to me? " he at length asked, turning his looks upon Emma.

" Oh, what can I say to you? " she exclaimed, joining her hands together and gazing up into his countenance with every appearance of the most impassioned appeal. " I would beseech you, I would implore you to have mercy upon myself and my two sisters. But, ah! I feel faint — the excitement I have endured has been too much — permit me to lean upon your arm — only for a few moments, till we reach that knot of trees — There! — Thanks, thanks, Baron Bergami. I see that, after all, you do not so utterly loathe, hate, and despise me — oh, unfortunate being that I am, to be compelled to give utterance to such words as these! "

And she sank, with every appearance of exhaustion, at the foot of a group of trees, to which Bergami had hurried her as she clung to his arm, and the shade of which now concealed them both from the observation of any one who might be walking within eyeshot of the place.

" Pray sit down by my side. Humour me thus far, grant me this little favour," murmured Emma, seeming as if she were about to faint, " for I wish to speak to you seriously, most seriously, and I must rest here for a few minutes."

Bergami made no hesitation in yielding to her request, and this ready complaisance on his part emboldened the artful young woman to an extent that she flattered herself the influence of her spells was beginning to work.

" Oh, if it were not for this delicious breeze which comes from the lake, I should faint," she said, as Bergami seated

himself on the bank at a distance of perhaps three feet from where she was half-reclining. "Is not this breeze beautiful?" and as if with quite a mechanical and unconscious movement, she threw back her scarf and opened the front of her dress in such a manner as to display her bosom.

"Yes," said the baron, not appearing to notice the manœuvre, but keeping his eyes bent downward, "it is indeed a beauteous evening, and distressing is it to think that while nature is so serene around, the human heart cannot imbibe a kindred inspiration from this soft tranquillity. The glory of the descending sun is upon the waters; its beams appear to penetrate, like shafts of living light, down into the very depths of that sleeping sea. How is it that the lustre of that same heavenly orb cannot fathom the profundities of the human soul?"

"Oh, how delicious is it to hear you speak thus!" said Emma, in accents that were soft and musically tremulous. "You do not now seem to be angry with me, you do not now appear as if rancorous feelings were agitating within you — Ah! is it possible that you have comprehended that emotion which for some time past I have experienced toward you? If such be indeed the case, then shall I conceive myself blessed with a happiness which on account of my misdeeds is so utterly undeserved. Ah! you do not chide me, you do not bid me hold my peace? Then indeed is there hope that I am not altogether indifferent to you. Oh, an idea suddenly strikes me," she cried, with no affectation of a suddenly enhancing excitement, for the thought did that moment flash to her brain. "The mercy you are disposed to show us is dictated by a generous pity, dare I say, a tender compassion for me?"

She paused for a reply, but Bergami, instead of giving one, bowed his face upon his hands and appeared to plunge into deep thought.

"Oh, I have guessed the truth," exclaimed Emma, her tones becoming now almost exultant as she felt within herself the assurance that the magic of her charms was working its effect upon the Prussian officer. "Now, then, shall I confess frankly and candidly that I love you. Yes, noble Bergami, from the first moment I set eyes upon you, have I been smitten by your handsome person, your engaging manners, your fascinating discourse; and latterly I have

not been able to conceal from you this love of mine, but have sought on many occasions to convey an intimation of its existence to your comprehension. Think you it was by mere accident that I have been so frequently placed next to you at the dinner-table, or that when walking abroad, I have found myself by your side? Ah! no, it was all intentional on my part, — those little ways and means and artifices by which a woman makes known her love."

" And if I were to give you the assurance of love in return," asked Bergami, slowly raising his head and turning his eyes full upon the young lady's countenance, which was now beaming with mingled hope, passion, and triumph, " if I were to confess to you that I have not been indifferent to your charms, that I have seen and understood your little wiles, and that if I have been slow to respond to them, it is because I was fearful lest my vanity should have led me to construe into love the merest tokens of friendship, — if I were to tell you all this, Emma, would you give me any proof of love in return? Would you convince me that yours is indeed a sincere, a genuine affection, and not a passing fantasy and evanescent whim? "

" O heavens! is it true, is it possible, that I hear you talking thus? " cried Emma, hurried away by the raptures of exultation and amorous passion, which were now utterly past control, and seizing Bergami's hand, she pressed it first to her lips and then to her heaving bosom.

" Love must have no dalliance until its sincerity has been proved," said Bergami, gently withdrawing his hand, but gazing upon Emma with every appearance of a tenderness that no longer sought to conceal itself.

" Speak, speak, what mean you? " she cried, the fever-heat of enthusiastic joy thrilling through her entire form.

" I said ere now that I required a proof of your love. Oh, give it to me," he added, with accents that suddenly became full of entreaty, as if he himself were inspired with some of the passion that made Emma's blood course like lightning in its crimson channels.

" But what proof do you require? " she asked, confident that her charms had altogether subdued him, and that he had become fettered as a slave within the magic circle of her blandishments.

" What proof? " he said, as if pausing to consider, " what

proof? I scarcely know what to ask for, unless it be your entire confidence with regard to the sad, tortuous course you have been pursuing. Yes, tell me everything, Emma," he continued, trembling as if with a strong excitement. "Prove that you are worthy of my love, that you are sorry for the past, and that you will do all you can by your good conduct to make reparation in future. Convince me, I say, that you are worthy of the love which I have to give you, and the confession of that love shall be made."

"This is happiness unspeakable, ineffable," murmured Emma, really feeling what she said; for, as the reader is already aware, she had for some time past conceived a strong fancy for Bergami. "Ask me what you choose, and I will reply faithfully and truly."

"Then will you secure my most devoted love," replied Bergami, gazing upon her with looks that seemed full of passion; but as she again attempted to seize his hand, he snatched it away, crying, "No, no, not until you have given me proofs the most convincing that you love me. Then, then, it is not my hand that you shall take, but it is to my arms you shall come — "

And he stopped short, gasping as with excess of pleasure at the bare idea of joys which he was conjuring up to his imagination.

"Ah! ask me some question and you will see whether I am prompt to reply," said Emma, whose head was turning and whose senses were becoming bewildered in the tumult of blissful emotions which her easy triumph over Bergami had naturally excited, and which were all the more extravagant, all the more thrilling and intoxicating, inasmuch as they had succeeded an interval of such blank despair and cruel terror.

"Well, then," said Bergami, speaking quickly, as if putting at random the first thing that entered his head, "tell me, dear Emma, tell me, which of you three sisters it is who, not content with masquerading on one or two occasions in male costume, must actually have imitated so closely the very garb that I sometimes wear as to be taken for me?"

"Oh, if I tell you, if I tell you," exclaimed Emma, now elevated to the highest degree of excitement, as if she felt she was touching on the very brink of that paradise which

contained the consummation of her desires and would be the reward as well as the proof of her triumph, " if I tell you everything which regards that subject, shall I the next moment be enfolded in your embrace? "

" Yes, yes," answered Bergami, " you shall, you shall."

" Then it was I who have worn a costume resembling yours," she answered, in the delirium that filled her brain. " It was I who personated you, having secretly procured a dress the counterpart of your own. Yes, and likewise whiskers and moustache — oh, a beautiful moustache," she cried, almost with childish delight, in the exultation that filled her soul and was thus hurrying her so quickly along in the giddy whirl of her thoughts. " In every respect did I assume your external appearance, coat, boots — And all that costume, so neat, so perfect, so elegant, I have it still, it is in my own room, and one of these days, when you have time and choose to humour me, I will put it on and you will tell me how I look."

" Oh, Emma, Emma! you are intoxicating my brain, you are making me drunk with wicked thoughts," murmured the royal equerry, as he drew closer toward the siren. " Come into my arms."

And the next moment Emma, the wanton, glowing, impassioned Emma, was palpitating upon his breast, with her arms thrown around his neck and her lips pressed to his cheek. But scarcely had this incident of the scene endured for a moment, scarcely, indeed, had she thus precipitated herself into his embrace, when, appearing to be suddenly alarmed, he said, " We shall be observed, we shall be observed. Good heavens! what will then be thought? What will be said of us? " And disengaging himself from her clasp, he started to his feet.

" Oh, you are mine, you are mine! " she exclaimed, in a voice full of rapture, " and I am happy, I am happy," she repeated, her tone swelling to a pitch of thrilling exultation. " But when shall we meet again — Ah! we shall meet in the presence of others, but I mean, when shall we meet alone? "

" Listen, Emma," said Bergami, taking her hand and pressing it with every appearance of enthusiastic warmth, " I long to see you in that dress of which you have spoken,

that costume wherewith you imitate me. Will you then put it on to-night and come to my chamber? "

"To-night!" echoed Emma, in rapturous joy. "Yes, but that appointment at Maravelli's house, with Jocelyn Loftus — "

"Must be kept," answered Bergami, "because I dare not appear in any way to depart one tittle from the arrangements entered into between him and me, and if you were not to go, you would have to allege as an excuse some new understanding with me. This would be to betray what has now taken place, to betray my weakness, in a word, to prove that I had succumbed to the fascination of your charms. And this must not be. Not even to your sisters must you state what has occurred. If you do, if to a living soul you breathe a syllable of this love of ours, I will then stifle it, I will renounce it, I will tear your image from my heart, — yes, and all this love of mine, this frantic passion with which you have inspired me, shall turn into the deadliest hate! Do you understand me, and will you pledge yourself sacredly and solemnly? "

"I do, I do," answered Emma, trembling all over with the fever of joyous excitement, for this seemed to be a triumph so wondrous, so complete, so crowning on her part, that while it promised to minister unto all her devouring desires, it was likewise most eminently flattering to her vanity. "I swear that I will not mention to a soul, no, not to a soul, one syllable of what has now taken place between us. I will keep the appointment, too, at Maravelli's house, in company with my sisters. And afterward," she said, with a look full of wanton wickedness and sensuous mischief, "afterward — "

"Yes, afterward, no matter at what hour you may come back to the villa from that appointment," said Bergami, "you will apparel yourself in the costume of which you have spoken, and you will come stealthily to my chamber? "

"Yes, oh, yes, I will not fail you," she murmured, her heart already panting with voluptuous longings, as with eyes brimful of passion she surveyed the handsome Bergami from head to foot, devouring him, as it were, with her luxurious looks.

"And now return to your sisters," he said, seizing her hand and again pressing it with cordial warmth. "But

remember," he added, fixing upon her an earnest, warning gaze, "if you betray me, then farewell love, farewell the safety which I may guarantee to your sisters and yourself, farewell everything, save the implacable vengeance which I will wreak upon you."

Having thus spoken, the royal equerry hurried away toward the villa, avoiding altogether the border of the lake as he thus retraced his steps homeward.

Some minutes elapsed before Emma could in any way succeed in calming the flutterings of her heart or reason herself into tranquillity. She was now entirely absorbed in this new passion which had suddenly blazed up in her heart, being so unexpectedly and copiously fed by the burning fuel which Bergami's conduct had imparted to it. Indeed, so complete was the influence which that man had in so short a time succeeded in gaining over her, that she was resolved, as far as she was able, to follow his injunctions in respect to keeping their amour secret. That is to say, she decided upon telling her sisters as little on the subject as possible, lest by any chance an unfortunate look, or a word too full of meaning on their part, should prove to Bergami that she had betrayed him and thus alienate him from her for ever. Having settled this determination in her mind, and having composed her looks and her thoughts as well as she was able, she issued forth from the shady bower formed by the group of trees, and retraced her way along the bank of Lake Leman toward the jetty, in order to rejoin her sisters.

But in the meantime what had happened to Agatha and Julia? For while Emma was engaged with Bergami in the manner just described, her two sisters were experiencing an adventure which, although appearing at the moment to be but of trivial importance in comparison with the other exciting circumstances that surrounded them, was nevertheless destined to prove most grave and serious in its results.

On parting so abruptly from Emma and Bergami, Agatha and Julia sped along the shore of the lake in the direction of the jetty whence they had ere now started.

"Think you that Emma will succeed with the equerry?" asked Julia. "Oh, if he were to yield to her seductiveness, her wiles, her fascinations!"

"It would indeed be most important for us," replied

Agatha. "For, to speak candidly, although I feel not so truly wretched now as I did a few hours back when this storm of dangers exploded above our heads, yet still my heart is filled with misgivings."

"And naturally so," said Julia. "This appointment with Loftus at Maravelli's house, where the dead child lies —"

"Oh, do not talk of it," interrupted Agatha, a strong tremor shooting through her entire form as she and her sister paced rapidly along the margin of the lake, on whose sleeping waters the slanting sunbeams still poured the mellowed glow of their effulgence.

Then there was a long silence, which remained unbroken until the sisters came within a few yards of the jetty, when, raising their eyes from the ground on which they had been bent in meditative mood, they suddenly observed a gentleman seated on a beam which had become detached from the mass of piles and intricacy of woodwork forming the huge pier. At the very same moment that Agatha and Julia observed this gentleman, another gentleman appeared around the piles forming the commencement of the jetty, and as these two gentlemen thus met, evidently unexpectedly, ejaculations of surprise burst from their lips.

"Ah! my lord?" exclaimed the one who had just made his appearance upon the scene.

"What! you here again, Colonel Malpas?" cried the other, sternly, as he sprang up from his seat on the beam.

But simultaneously did a cry of amazement fall from the lips of Julia as she at once recognized the Earl of Curzon in this latter individual.

"Ah!" cried the nobleman, whose attention was now all in a moment attracted to Julia, "is it indeed you, my charmer, my beauty?"

"Then the other must be Emma," exclaimed Malpas, also springing forward along with the earl toward the ladies; but on catching sight of Agatha's countenance he stopped short, in sudden disappointment, stammering, "No — it is not — I beg a thousand pardons."

"This is my elder sister, Miss Owen," said Julia, at once assuming a dignified and even haughty look. "Agatha," she continued, turning to her sister, "this is the Earl of Curzon, of whom I have spoken to you on former occasions."

"And you have already learned," said the colonel, again

advancing, " by the expression which fell from Lord Curzon's lips, that my name is Malpas. Doubtless your sister, Miss Emma, has mentioned my name to you, since it appears that you," he added, fixing his eyes upon Julia, " have spoken of the earl to your sister here."

" And it would likewise seem, then," Julia at once observed, " that the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas have spoken to each other relative to us, else would they be more discreet in what they let fall from their lips on the present occasion."

" Dear Julia," said the earl, " let us have no angry words, I implore you. I have come all the way from England to see you again."

" And I also to see your sister Emma again," added Malpas. " Ah! where is she? "

" But why this haughtiness of air, this reserved manner, this repelling look? " exclaimed Curzon, in a tone of entreaty to Julia.

While the preceding conversation was taking place, both Agatha and Julia had maintained that air of calm dignity which, as well as any other mien, they knew so well how to put on to suit the particular occasion. The elder sister now saw Curzon and Malpas for the first time, and she certainly could not wonder that her sisters had accepted them as lovers, for, as the reader is aware, they were both good-looking, tall, and well made. She however affected to regard them without interest, but with a certain loftiness of demeanour, as if she identified herself with the displeasure which Julia chose to demonstrate.

" I can say for myself, Lord Curzon," observed the latter young lady, in reply to the passionate exclamations which had been addressed to her, " and I think I can also answer for my sister Emma in her absence, that the plot you and Colonel Malpas so unaccountably but so shamefully set on foot to carry us off to Lausanne, but which so signally failed, must be considered as having raised up an insurmountable barrier between us in future. I therefore wish you good evening. Agatha, come, dear."

" One word, Julia," ejaculated Curzon, seizing her by the hand and holding it fast despite her efforts to withdraw it. " We cannot part thus. I beseech you to give me an opportunity to explain myself."

"And I, Miss Owen," said Malpas, addressing himself to Agatha, "beseech you to intercede in my behalf with your sister Emma, since it is evident that you have no secrets from each other."

"Unhand me, Lord Curzon," said Julia, but her efforts to extricate her hand from his grasp had become feebler and feebler. Indeed, with every appearance of vanishing fortitude and dissolving coldness she said, "Do let me go, 'tis useless to detain me."

"But will you not give me an opportunity of explaining myself?" persisted Curzon. "After all that has taken place between us, I beg and implore you — "

"I will do nothing — nothing," returned Julia, though with less decision in her voice than before, "unless by Emma's consent. We have told each other everything, we have no secrets, and we must act in concert."

"Yes," observed Agatha, in reply to the solicitations which Malpas continued to press upon her to the effect that she would speak on his behalf to Emma, "I can say nothing more than that my sister must act for herself."

"Then listen," exclaimed Curzon, an idea suddenly striking him, and still he retained Julia's hand in his own. "Will you forward me your decision in writing? Will you think over it? But I implore you not to send me back to England without having had an opportunity of making my peace with you, even if everything should be at an end between us."

"Where will a note reach you?" asked Julia, scarcely knowing what she said, for the natural sentimentalism of her disposition was triumphing over her endeavour to appear distant and reserved, and had it not been for the presence of Agatha, to whom she had boasted in the morning of the way she should treat Curzon if ever they met again, she would at once have precipitated herself into his arms.

"I am staying at the Hotel Royal, and this time under my own name," he said. "Will you send me a line, only a single line, to that address? And whatever appointment you may give, — for I know that you cannot be cruel enough to refuse my request, — I will keep."

"Well, well," said Julia, faintly, "I will think of it. Perhaps you shall hear from me," and now she withdrew her hand, but not before Curzon had pressed it to his lips.

"Then, if Emma will see you, Colonel Malpas," said Agatha, anxious to put an end to the present scene, "she also shall write to you. What is your address?"

"By a coincidence," answered the colonel, "I also have taken up my abode at the Hotel Royal. I only arrived within this hour at Geneva, and at once strolled down hither in the hope, and almost with the presentiment — "

"Well, but what name do you bear at the Hotel Royal?" asked Agatha, somewhat impatiently.

"My own name, that of Malpas," was the reply. "But pray do your best for me with your charming sister Emma."

"We shall see," rejoined Agatha. "Good evening, Colonel Malpas; good evening, my lord," and taking Julia's hand, she turned abruptly away from the nobleman and the colonel.

But as Julia accompanied her, she threw a quick and scarcely perceptible glance at Curzon over her shoulder, a glance which nevertheless conveyed hope and promise.

The two girls passed quickly away from the vicinage of the jetty, once more proceeding along the bank in the direction which they had ere now pursued with Bergami and their sister. When near the clump of trees they encountered Emma, who was coming to meet them, and all three hastened by the shortest cut back to the villa.

Meantime the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas stood gazing for upwards of a minute on the retreating forms of Agatha and Julia until they were at some considerable distance, and then, averting their eyes, they threw their looks upon each other. It was evident that for the moment Curzon knew not exactly how to treat Malpas, and that the colonel, on the other hand, was equally uncertain on what ground to consider himself standing with regard to the earl, the scene at Lausanne being naturally uppermost in the mind of each, — that scene in which they had mutually forced the revelation of secrets at the pistol's muzzle.

"So we meet again," said Curzon, at length breaking silence. Then bursting out into a laugh that was partly real and partly forced, he cried, "Well, upon my word, there is something uncommonly ludicrous in all this."

"And awkward, too," said Malpas, also laughing, for he would much sooner be on good than on bad terms with the earl.

" I suppose that Venetia has sent you again? " said Curzon, inquiringly.

" Yes," answered Malpas. " And she has sent you too, doubtless? "

" I do not deny it. I will even admit it is on the same errand, too, as before, but this time with far more positive instructions."

" The same with me," rejoined Malpas. " I am to leave no stone unturned to break up the conspiracy. I am even to tell Emma that I know all about it, and threaten her with exposure unless she herself voluntarily withdraws from it."

" Just what I am to say to Julia," remarked Curzon. " And the reward which Venetia has promised you? "

" A thousand a year," replied Malpas. " She gave me five thousand when in London, and I expect to find three or four thousand more when I call at the banker's in this city to-morrow. I came too late to-day. Those thousands are a reward for past services — But what have you had, and what more do you expect? "

" I also have had a few thousands," replied Curzon, " and, more than that, I am to have a marquisate and a pension. Venetia has promised it to me. But I see that we must compare notes again, and that we have a great deal to talk about. Come, since we are both staying at the same hotel, let us return thither in each other's company, and if you like, we will dine together and talk matters over."

" Be it so," responded Malpas. " What are the odds that we do not each receive a tender billet from our fair ones before many hours have elapsed? "

" I am convinced that we shall," answered Curzon. " That parting glance which Julia gave me has left no room for doubt."

Thus conversing, Lord Curzon and Colonel Malpas strolled away from the vicinage of the pier, in the direction of the city.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LISTENERS — THE OLD HARRIDAN

The plot of our tale is thickening rapidly; incidents are multiplying, and episodes are growing out of the adventures which we are now chronicling. It therefore requires a clear head on our part to keep these varied and yet ramified occurrences as distinctly defined as possible, each in the special channel in which it is flowing, while the reader must carefully follow us as we advance in the seeming labyrinth, through which we shall, however, conduct him in a way to render all the objects he may encounter perfectly intelligible and clear.

But ere we return to the three sisters whom we left wending their way back to the villa, we must pause for a little space to inform our readers that the whole scene which we have just described as having taken place on the part of Curzon, Malpas, Agatha, and Julia was witnessed by two ladies who were concealed behind the piles of the jetty. These two ladies were Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon, for such was really Maravelli's new lodger, who had chosen to call herself Mrs. Montague.

When Curzon and Malpas were at a sufficient distance from the pier, Lady Prescott and the countess issued forth from their hiding-place, and for some minutes they walked along the bank of the lake, side by side, in the deepest silence. But their countenances showed how violent, or, rather, how intense, were the feelings that agitated their hearts, the passions which swayed their souls. Each was of an olive complexion, but a dead pallor now sat upon their features, and the strangeness of their looks marred even their beauty and gave them at the moment a ghastly, almost a hideous aspect.

" This is a strange, a wonderful coincidence," said Lady Prescott, at length breaking silence.

" Yes, a coincidence that seems as if it were prepared by Satan," responded the Countess of Curzon, in a tone full of deep and sinister meaning.

" I understand you," said Lady Prescott, as if her own voice had caught up precisely the same intonation, which was indeed natural enough, as the same furies were gnawing at either heart and their souls were tortured by kindred fires.

" Now," said the Countess of Curzon, after a brief pause, " that man on whose head you have invoked an implacable vengeance is in your power."

" But that man," rejoined Lady Prescott, " is your husband."

" My husband! " echoed Editha, with a mocking laugh and a fiendish look, " my mortal enemy, you mean. If you refuse to slay him, I will do the deed myself. Heartless villain, miscreant that he is, he has covered me with disgrace and plunged me into ruin. Oh, with what fiendlike malice did he gloat over my fall and expose me even to the very servants on that dreadful night when everything was discovered. Ay, and that demoniac vengeance which he wreaked upon my faithful, my loving Gertrude — But I have already told you everything, Lady Prescott, and need not recapitulate."

" Then you are decided upon abandoning your husband unto my vengeance? " asked the latter.

" I am," replied Editha, in a deep voice, but the accents of which were full of a frightful and implacable resolution.

" Vengeance for me, then! " exclaimed Lady Prescott, in a tone suddenly thrilling with exultation, " and vengeance likewise for you, inasmuch as Malpas, that man of whom you have told me so many things, is within your reach."

" Yes, Malpas, the vile, sneaking, pitiful coward," resumed Editha, with a terrible accentuation on the words, " he who gave my husband all the information which enabled him to unmask the stratagem carried on through the agency of Lady Lechmere, he who furnished the clue to those arrangements which had been so admirably combined and which without such betrayal would have defied all his penetration, that Malpas who has worked so much mischief

after all the love I once bestowed on him, that villain is at length in my power, and he shall die."

Having given utterance to these words with a terrible emphasis, Editha remained silent for two or three minutes, during which interval Lady Prescott also held her peace, being absorbed in her own reflections.

" Does it not seem," at length continued the Countess of Curzon, " as if some superior power were guiding us on both alike to the consummation of that vengeance which we had so much longed to wreak, but the accomplishment of which until this last half-hour seemed so distant, even if it were ever possible at all? But as I have already told you, some secret and unaccountable presentiment urged me, when flying from disgrace in England and seeking refuge on the Continent, to visit Geneva. It was not so much on account of the tranquillity of this little republic that I came hither, but impelled by that feeling to which I have just alluded — "

" But," interrupted Lady Prescott, " in recounting your history to me yesterday, did you not mention that during the long absence of your husband from home you received two letters, one bearing the postmark of Milan, and the other of Geneva? "

" Yes, it was so," answered Lady Curzon, " and perhaps this circumstance was floating uppermost in my mind, though unconsciously at the time, when I resolved upon coming to Geneva. But far, very far was I from anticipating that I should meet my husband here. Equally little did I expect to encounter this hated Malpas, against whom all my rage is now concentrated. When we came forth to walk this evening and bent our steps toward the jetty — "

" You would not believe, when from a distance I recognized your husband approaching," interrupted Lady Prescott. " But I knew him at once, knew him by his gait, his walk so noble, so dignified, so commanding, and yet so elegant."

" Heavens! can you thus praise him whom you have doomed to death? " cried Editha, almost savagely.

" True, I was wrong to call up any memory that might possibly serve to weaken me in my purpose. And yet it was not through a transitory failing in my resolve," continued Lady Prescott, " for that is stern, inexorable, but it was the train of thought unwittingly flowing on and giving

expression to itself, even, as it were, against my own will."

"We must show no weakness in the consummation of our design," said Editha.

"Think you not that the scene which has just taken place is but too well calculated to rivet the implacability of my own craving for revenge?" asked Lady Prescott. "When at that moment we first beheld Lord Curzon approaching the jetty, and I dragged you, as it were, behind the piles so that we might conceal ourselves from his view, it was because I wished to watch his movements. In thus wishing I had a motive, and that motive was to avail myself of any circumstance which might transpire to put the means of vengeance within my reach. And he, not having observed us as we so quickly concealed ourselves under the jetty, he, little suspecting who was so near, addressed himself in words of tenderness and love and entreaty to that profligate Julia Owen."

"But all those allusions which subsequently took place," asked Editha, "between my husband and Malpas relative to Lady Sackville, what could they mean?"

"Oh, let us not trouble ourselves," exclaimed Lady Prescott, "about the affairs of others. We have our own course to pursue."

"Yes, you are right," said Editha. "Let us concentrate all our thoughts upon this vengeance which we are about to wreak."

Return we now to the three sisters.

When Emma rejoined Agatha and Julia in the manner already described, she had not so fully composed her countenance as to subdue altogether the flush of pleasurable excitement which the scene with Bergami had conjured up.

"Have you ensnared him? Have you touched his heart?" inquired Julia, anxiously.

"Yes, I think that I have made some little impression upon him," responded Emma. "I evidently moved him by my tears and the little demonstrations of love that I was enabled to make, but I dared not go too far. At all events," she added, suddenly recollecting the frightful threat which Mrs. Ranger had uttered ere now, that if circumstances required the deed, Bergami must die as well as Loftus and

Lady Prescott, " at all events, I think that to-morrow, if I have another opportunity, I shall gain a victory. Indeed, I am sure of it. There is no need to fear Bergami. He will rather take our part than otherwise, and altogether I am full of hope that we shall yet come forth scatheless from the terrible ordeal of dangers through which we are passing."

" Oh, what a blessing it will be to hail peace, contentment, and tranquillity once more! " said Agatha, with the most genuine sincerity.

" And I echo the observation," added Julia. " Let us once get clear out of this present embarrassment, and no more conspiracies for me, no more intrigues save those of gallantry and love. And this reminds me to tell you, Emma, of what has just taken place down at the jetty yonder."

She then described the scene which had occurred with the earl and with Malpas. Emma was much astonished to hear of the return of those two individuals, and when her sister had concluded her tale, she said, " It was all very well to promise to write to them, in order to get rid of their importunity, but I hope, Julia, that you do not intend any such thing. Remember what you said this morning, — that you would never forgive Curzon — "

" Nor will I," interrupted Julia, somewhat petulantly, though at the bottom of her heart there lurked the secret resolve that should existing circumstances turn out favourably in the long run, she would renew her amour with the handsome earl despite her two sisters' ridicule or scorn.

They now reëntered the villa, and it being past seven o'clock, they had only just time to hasten to their respective rooms and make the necessary change in their toilet for dinner. This repast in the princess's household was usually served up at half-past seven, but on the evening of which we are writing it was delayed somewhat, and therefore the sisters were not late, after all. The princess had been seized with indisposition, probably arising from the excitement which she had experienced during the day, and she kept her own room instead of descending to the dinner-table. Bergami was likewise absent, he having gone into the city with the alleged excuse of being invited to dine with a friend, but in reality to see Jocelyn Loftus. There were consequently only the six ladies in waiting, the young lady who acted as " reader " to the princess, and Mrs. Ranger at the dinner-

table on the present occasion. The meal was not therefore prolonged, and soon after the dessert, Mrs. Ranger sought an opportunity of taking Agatha aside in order to ascertain what had passed at the interview with Bergami.

Proceeding to another room, the old harridan and the young lady shut themselves in, and the latter repeated all that Bergami had said in her hearing. She then explained what Emma had said relative to her hopes of success in ensnaring the royal equerry within the influence of her charms.

"And this appointment with Loftus is for twelve to-night?" said Mrs. Ranger, who had listened with the profoundest attention and interest to all that had just fallen from Agatha's lips.

"For twelve to-night," responded the young lady, shuddering visibly.

"But Bergami's manner was kind?" continued Mrs. Ranger, still speaking interrogatively.

"No, not kind, but forbearing," answered Agatha.

"Ah! I do not like it, I do not like it," said Mrs. Ranger, and she shook her head ominously. "But does Emma really think that she will succeed in winning the equerry to her arms?"

"She does, she does," replied Agatha. "She is sanguine, — so sanguine that she feels convinced Bergami will save us."

"But Bergami cannot save us if Jocelyn Loftus be determined to ruin us," interrupted Mrs. Ranger, emphatically. "Ah! if Bergami had succumbed this evening, if Emma had succeeded ere now in bringing him to her feet, if, in a word, he had already received her favours, then would it be different, and he would doubtless raise heaven and earth to save her, and in saving her must have held us harmless, also. But it is not so. He has not succumbed, and any little advantage which Emma may have gained over his feelings by playing upon his senses will be lost as sober reflection returns to him. Besides, wherefore has Bergami gone into the city now? Not to dine with a friend. No, it is preposterous, but to see Loftus — "

"Ah! then you really believe," interrupted Agatha, "that we are still as much encompassed by dreadful perils as ever?"

"Do I think so?" ejaculated Mrs. Ranger, "indeed, I

do. And now prepare yourself, Agatha, prepare yourself, I say," she repeated, in a deep voice and with an ominous look, " to hear the resolve, the last resolve to which I have come, a resolve which is fixed and whence there shall be no retreat."

" And that resolve? " asked Agatha, shudderingly.

" It is," returned Mrs. Ranger, fixing her eyes with reptile-like glare upon the young lady, " that unless Loftus positively and actually, of his own accord, proclaims his forgiveness of you this night, you must withhold the word from Maravelli's ear that will spare his and Lady Prescott's life. You must let the physician do the work of death according to his promise, and then Bergami must die also."

" But Emma? " interrupted Agatha, in a thick and scarcely audible voice, " will she consent to this? Or will she not, in her vanity, her infatuation, or whatever it may be, insist that Bergami shall live, for her to try her seductive arts upon him? "

" Foolish girl that you are! " said Mrs. Ranger, " can you not understand that Emma must be kept ignorant of this feature of our proceedings? "

" Oh, yes, I understand you now," said Agatha, shuddering again. " Would to God that I also were ignorant — "

" Cease this pining and whining," interrupted Mrs. Ranger, sharply. " It is not your hand that will do these deeds, nor will suspicion fall upon us. Let Maravelli work, on the one hand, with his subtle poisons; I, on the other, will go and seek those instruments of crime, Kobolt and his gang, whom this night I will introduce secretly and stealthily into the villa. They shall hide themselves in my room until you return from Maravelli's. Then if you tell me that your interview with Loftus has been of a satisfactory character and that you have spoken the word to Maravelli to spare him and Lady Prescott, then, I say, may Bergami be spared also, and Kobolt with his comrades may go about their business. But if, on the other hand, on your return from Maravelli's you tell me that the word has not been spoken, but that Loftus and Lady Prescott will die, then must Bergami die also. Kobolt and his gang will do the work, and ere they quit his room, to which I myself will conduct them, they in their experience of such matters shall give it the aspect of having been entered for the sake of plunder — "

"Oh, cease these details," interrupted Agatha. "Do what you will, take any step you consider necessary, no matter how desperate, to save us all from this gulf of ruin which yawns at our feet. But, my God! spare me the details, spare me the details! Would to Heaven that the next week, or even the next four and twenty hours, were over!"

"Now, do not give way to this puling language," said Mrs. Ranger, harshly. "Be a woman of courage; take a lesson from me. Have I not told you, on former occasions, that when circumstances require energetic action, I shake off the nervousness and the affectation of the woman, and buckle on an armour of strength and effrontery such as men themselves might be proud to wear? Come, you must not remain too long away from the drawing-room. Go back, sustain your own spirits, and do all you can to cheer your sisters. And mind," added Mrs. Ranger, impressively, "not a syllable, not a single syllable to either of them, least of all to Emma, relative to the decision to which I have come in respect to Bergami. I now go forth to find Kobolt and his gang, who, from what Maravelli told me this morning, are sure to be found dragging the lake at the jetty."

Having thus spoken, Mrs. Ranger hastened away from the apartment where the preceding colloquy had taken place, while Agatha, after remaining for a few minutes to compose her looks and settle her thoughts, went back to the drawing-room.

It was now nine o'clock, and Bergami had returned. When Agatha entered the room, she found him seated on a sofa, apparently engaged with a book, but he was in reality watching Emma's looks and manner, in order to see whether from any little circumstance he could possibly judge if she had betrayed to her sisters the scene which had taken place in the shade of the knot of trees. Presently the young lady, catching his look and perceiving in it a kind of inquiring expression, seized an opportunity to approach him under pretence of showing him a print at which she had been looking at the table, and as she bent down, she said, in the lowest possible whisper, "I see that you are observing me, but I have not broken my word."

"It is well," was the responsive whisper that came from the equerry's lips, accompanied by a look of deep meaning.

Emma felt her heart leap with joy at this species of renewed pledge of affection which Bergami had just given her, and she returned to her seat, scarcely able to prevent her feelings from being betrayed by her countenance.

CHAPTER XXX

FRESH SCENES AT THE JETTY

The Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas were sipping their wine at the Hotel Royal, between eight and nine o'clock, and discoursing on the object of their revisit to Geneva, and though there was evidently a forced familiarity subsisting between them, instead of the intimacy of friendship, they nevertheless were opening their minds pretty freely to each other.

"Well, but about this pretty Genevese girl of whom we were talking just now," said Malpas, after a brief pause in the discourse, "what do you propose doing with regard to her?"

"I will go and see her to-morrow," answered the earl, "and no doubt shall have a pretty scene of weeping and bitterness and reproaches and so forth. But I must make up my mind to endure all that, and when the first ebullition of feeling has subsided, I shall enter upon the business part of the matter and propose a little annuity or something of the sort."

"Or else find some needy young fellow," observed Malpas, with a laugh, "who, for a certain sum of money paid down, will take the girl altogether off your hands and father the child when it is born."

"Well, perhaps I may do something in that way," rejoined Curzon, carelessly. "But the worst of it is, the girl is rather sentimentally inclined and not mercenary. She is one of those tender-hearted creatures who will persist in loving when they themselves are no longer loved, and who cannot see or will not understand that they were taken for aught save the playthings of the moment."

But this heartless speech, so well worthy of an English

aristocrat, — who, by the bye, beats all the rest of humanity on the score of utter heartlessness, — was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the waiter, who presented a note to the Earl of Curzon and then immediately retired.

"A lady's hand! a sweet, beautiful hand!" ejaculated the nobleman, as he took up the billet.

"From the Owens?" demanded the colonel, eagerly.

"No doubt of it," was his lordship's reply. "Who else could write to us in Geneva?"

Thus speaking, he broke the seal and glanced his eyes over the note. Then tossing it across the table, he observed, with a self-satisfied air, "To be sure! Did I not tell you how it would be?"

Malpas hastened to read the billet, the laconic contents of which ran as follows:

"Emma and Julia, having maturely considered the request proffered by Colonel Malpas and the Earl of Curzon, and deeming it right to give them an opportunity of explaining their conduct, will meet them at half-past nine o'clock precisely by the jetty on the border of the lake."

"Brief enough," said Malpas, "but explicit as brief. What say you? Shall we stroll thitherward at once?"

"By all means," answered Curzon. "I am anxious to get the business over and my mission fulfilled as soon as possible. Depend upon it, I do not intend to dally for as many days as I did weeks on the previous occasion after my fair Julia. I shall tell her my mind as plain as possible, according to my instructions, and have done with it."

"And I shall pursue the same course with regard to Emma," said Malpas, "because I mean to travel into Italy and thence pass up the Mediterranean to Turkey — "

"Well, never mind your future plans," interrupted the earl. "Let us go forth and attend to present occupations."

Having lighted their cigars, Lord Curzon and Colonel Malpas issued from the hotel and sauntered through the streets toward the lake, so regulating their walk according to the time that they reached the jetty about five minutes to the half-hour.

The night was beautiful. The sky was of a purply azure, studded with many a twinkling star, for the mist common to that clime and spot after sunset had only just begun to

settle on the surface of the lake, and had not sufficiently expanded to mar the clear view of heaven above.

The earl and Malpas walked to and fro in the immediate vicinity of the jetty, impregnating the air with the smoke of their cigars and speaking but little. They were not kept waiting beyond the time mentioned in the note, for scarcely had the clock towers chimed the half-hour when two female figures, closely veiled, passed suddenly around the massive woodwork forming the commencement of the pier, and accosted the two loungers.

"Ah! this is indeed kind of you," said Curzon, as one of the ladies immediately took him by the arm and began to draw him away from his companion Malpas, on whose arm the other lady fastened herself in a similar manner.

Curzon took the hand which rested upon his arm, and pressed it tenderly, at the same time observing, "Will you not raise your veil? Am I not to be permitted one kiss, Julia, one single kiss, after this absence? Or, at all events, may I not claim it as the reward for having come back to you? What! no answer? And yet methought that when you looked back at me for a single moment this evening, as you turned abruptly away with your sister Agatha, there was forgiveness in those sweet eyes of thine. But I suppose," continued the earl, after having vainly paused for nearly a minute to see whether his fair one would vouchsafe a reply, "that you feel yourself so deeply offended that you must have an explanation before you confer the slightest favour. Is it so, Julia? Come, speak, speak!"

While the earl was thus addressing his female companion, who was both cloaked and veiled, she had led him around the piles of the jetty, so that they were now upon the opposite side from that where they had first met; or, to make the matter still more intelligible to the reader, we may observe that Malpas and his companion had remained on one side of the pier, while Curzon and his fair one had gone around to the other.

"Come now," resumed the earl, having a second time paused to see whether any answer would be vouchsafed, "this silence is ridiculous, this affectation most absurd. I thought that I should find you in a better mood, Julia. I did not think you could shut yourself up in a sullenness like this. Well, if you will not answer me, I must endeavour to

unseal those sweet lips of yours. It is usually said that kisses seal woman's lips; but I must now see if they will not have a contrary effect."

Thus speaking, Curzon threw his arms around his companion and endeavoured to tear away her veil. But all in a moment she started a pace backward, threw up the veil of her own accord, and exclaimed, " Behold me! "

" What! is it possible? " cried the earl, staggering back in utter amazement, as by the pure moonlight he discovered the features of Lady Prescott.

" Yes, 'tis I, the plaything whom you tossed aside," she instantaneously responded, in a hoarse voice.

Then, even as the last words were still issuing from her lips, she raised her arm, something gleamed in her hand. The next moment there was a flash, accompanied by a report, and quickly followed by the ejaculation of " O God! " uttered in sudden agony. Then there was a splash as of a heavy body falling into the lake, and all was still on this side of the pier.

But on the other side the report of the pistol was echoed, not by a mere reverberation, but by a like sound emanating from a similar weapon, and there, too, was a momentary cry of death, followed by a heavy splash in the lake, a gurgling sound, and the next instant all was still likewise on that side of the pier.

A few moments afterward Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon met each other at the commencement of the jetty, as each was hurrying away from the spot where murder had been accomplished.

" You have done it? " said the one to the other, in the low, hoarse voice of crime.

" Yes," was the answer, delivered in the same tone, and then they both hurried on toward the city without speaking another word, without even daring to exchange another look, for theirs was now the companionship of crime, a hideous and a horrible companionship, which deadens all friendship, stifles all sympathies, raising up in their place gloomy suspicion, dark mistrust, and therefore mutual aversion.

Half an hour afterward, when the mist had completely settled upon the lake and was veiling all the circumjacent scenery, three figures approached the jetty, and having satis-

"THE NEXT MOMENT THERE WAS A FLASH"
(Photograph from original by Hunt)

"THE NEXT MOMENT THERE WAS A FLASH"
Photogravure from original by Bird.

fied themselves, as far as they were able, that the coast was clear, they began to enter upon their usual avocations. These were Kobolt, Walden, and Hernani, who, having gambled away the money which they had received from Jocelyn Loftus, came to fling their nets into the lake in the hope of catching some of that "fish" for which they received so good a price from Doctor Maravelli. Indeed, as the doctor had a general order from the German universities for as many heads as he chose to transmit for purposes of phrenological study, and as he himself was passionately devoted to the use of the dissecting-knife, Kobolt and his gang always found a ready market for the "subjects" which they might procure. They therefore had their general order from the doctor for whatsoever they might fish up from Lake Leman, and what with accidents, murders, and suicides, there was a tolerably good harvest to be reaped in this way throughout the year.

Having arranged their tackle, they proceeded to drag in the usual manner, and in a few minutes they brought up a dead body.

"Why, this is good luck indeed!" said Kobolt, as they drew the corpse under the jetty. "Now, then, Walden, you be off and get down the cart."

"All right," said the individual thus addressed, and away he sped.

"Come, I don't like to be idle," said Kobolt to Hernani, "let us have another throw. Not that it is at all likely we shall get a second bite to our hooks on this occasion."

"Why not?" asked the Italian. "It's all a chapter of accidents, and in the same way that for weeks together we have fished every night without dragging up anything, so have we also now and then got a couple of bites on the same night. Come, let us go and drag the other side."

Having despoiled the corpse of the money and watch in the pockets, and taken a ring from the finger, congratulating themselves at the same time upon the value of the booty, the two men passed under the pier, and proceeded to fling their tackle on the side which they now reached.

Good luck again attended them, and in a few minutes they brought another corpse to the shore. Their savage joy was now indeed great, the more so as this one likewise had gold in its pockets, a watch and chain in the fob, and a couple

of rings on the fingers. But while they were yet despoiling it, the mist was swept somewhat away by one of those sudden squalls which often gush over the surface of Lake Leman, and the moonbeams poured fully down upon the face of the dead.

Ejaculations of amazement burst simultaneously from the lips of the two fishers of men as they at once recognized that countenance.

"It is Smith, the Englishman!" said Kobolt. "And look, murder has been done, his shirt-front is stained with blood. See, it is not slime, and the water has not washed it out. Ah! the blood is evidently flowing still, and the corpse is as fresh as it can be. Why, this must have been done within an hour!"

"Come, don't let us stand dallying here," growled Hernani, "but drag the body underneath the pier until the cart comes."

This they did, and then, as their curiosity was now acutely sharpened, they drew forth the other corpse just far enough into the moonlight to enable them to examine it closely. Their astonishment was enhanced even into dismay on at once recognizing the other Englishman, whom they knew by the name of Thompson, and who it was evident had likewise been murdered. But the latter had been shot through the head, for the mark was upon the brow where the bullet had entered, and the skull was shattered where it had passed out again.

"Some fearful work has been done here this evening," said Kobolt. "What can it all mean? How can it be?"

"I suppose," replied Hernani, "that if we were to stand here conjecturing for a month we should not find out. But when I come to think of it, we ought to be grateful to those who have done the deed, for in a very little time it has put a handsome booty in our way."

"Hush! I hear footsteps advancing," suddenly ejaculated Kobolt.

Then, having hastily dragged back the corpse of Malpas under the pier, they peeped forth from behind the massive and crowded piles. The moonlight was still pouring down upon the scene, and they were thus enabled to observe a female form approaching the spot. The rays fell upon the woman's countenance as she glanced quickly around in every

direction, and as the keen eyes of Kobolt recognized her, he whispered to his comrade, " It is one of the old ladies belonging to the villa, that we carried off to Lausanne."

" Perhaps, then," immediately suggested Hernani, also in a whisper, " she has had something to do with this murder of the very two men who employed us on that night, the occasion you speak of."

" Well, we have got nothing to do with all that," said Kobolt. " Let us speak to her."

They accordingly issued forth from beneath the pier and accosted Mrs. Ranger, for she it was. Instantaneously recognizing the two men, she at once told them it was they of whom she was in search. Kobolt laconically asked what she wanted, and she without much circumlocution proposed to them a certain thing, backing her explanation with the promise of a large reward. The amount thus named was tempting in the extreme, and the villains were not long in closing with her. As a matter of course she said nothing relative to the murders which the fishers of men had just discovered at the jetty, for the simple reason that she knew nought about them, and they did not think it worth while to intimate the subject to her, although in their own minds they felt pretty well convinced she was no stranger to the two dark deeds. In this surmise, however, they were utterly wrong, as the reader is already aware.

The interview between Mrs. Ranger and the two fishers of men did not occupy a quarter of an hour. Where the employer in a proposed crime is cool, collected, and determined, and the employed are willing, bribable, and ready, there is no need of many words. Thus was it that the bargain was soon made. An earnest of the price was placed in Kobolt's hand, a full understanding as to the mode of procedure was entered into, and Mrs. Ranger sped back to the villa, muttering to herself, " The remedies I am adopting are desperate, but the position in which I am placed is also desperate. Murder must secure my impunity, and murder will do it."

Thus congratulating herself on the means she had devised and was prepared to carry out, the harridan reëntered the royal dwelling.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DISSECTING-ROOM

It was about half-past eleven on this memorable night, and Doctor Maravelli was seated alone in his little parlour opening from the hall.

Loftus was in his own chamber, pondering upon the plan which he was putting into execution, and settling in his mind as to the exact details of the course which he should pursue when the three sisters were to make their appearance at midnight. As for the Countess of Curzon and Lady Prescott, they were also sitting up, for they had not as yet dared to retire to rest, each deeply feeling that after the crime which had been consummated no sleep would visit their pillows. They were therefore holding companionship in the drawing-room, endeavouring to look satisfied at the tremendous work they had done, but unable to conceal from each other the fact that they now would give worlds to have it all undone again.

Return we, however, to Maravelli, who was alone in his parlour. But what was he doing there? Upon the table at which he was seated stood a phial labelled "Poison." That venomous drug had he been compounding in his secret laboratory up-stairs, and having brought it down with him to the parlour, he was now contemplating it with the air of a man who has obtained the means of accomplishing a certain object but trembles at the bare idea of using it. Not that it was so much the criminality of the contemplated deed which thus made him waver in his purpose, but it was the dread of being found out. Nevertheless, having duly weighed all the considerations that presented themselves to his mental view, he made up his mind to do the deed, for imagination suggested no other avenue of escape from

the perils which threatened him, and which involved the hideous punishment of branding with a red-hot iron, to be followed by a long term of imprisonment.

But how was he to accomplish his murderous purpose? He thought of a thousand different plans. One was to mix some agreeable drink, infuse the poison therein, and take it up to his intended victims, as if it were an act of a host's courtesy that he was performing. But no, this would not do. They might suspect, or they might refuse to drink at all, or the draughts might be partaken of by others beneath the roof. Moreover, as Lady Prescott was not alone, but had the other lady lodger with her in the drawing-room, such a plan could not be carried out now, and the doctor felt that he could not visit her with a draught in her bedroom, after she had retired to rest, without exciting suspicion by the very impropriety of the act itself. Much less dared he send her up a draught by his housekeeper, whom he would not trust in these dark schemes which he was now contemplating. Then how was he to proceed? To wait till the morning and poison the coffee which Loftus and Lady Prescott would partake of at breakfast! No, this plan was not feasible. Opportunity might not serve, and, moreover, it would be dangerous to delay the deed and let the night pass without consummating it. Then how was he to act? He knew of no better, safer, or surer course than to enter their rooms respectively when they slept, and pour the poison between their lips, for it was of so fatal a nature that a single drop reaching the tongue would be followed by instantaneous death.

Yes, this must be the plan which he would adopt, and, having resolved upon it, he was about to secure the bottle in a cupboard, when a somewhat violent ring at the bell startled him. So often, at about the same period of the night, had just such a sharp, hasty ring been given before, that its meaning instantaneously struck him, and as he always made it a point to answer in person all summonses after a certain hour, he sped forth from his parlour and opened the front door. As he had anticipated, he beheld the three figures of the fishers of men, with their cart, in the narrow street.

"Ah!" he said, in a hasty whisper, "it is unfortunate you should come hither to-night, for I am particularly engaged."

"But what are we to do, then?" demanded Kobolt, gruffly. "We can't go and fling them back again into the lake, and as for taking them to our own lodgings, is out of the question."

"Them?" echoed Maravelli. "Have you more than one?"

"Yes, two fine, fresh subjects, — murdered, too."

"Then, indeed," ejaculated the doctor, nervously, "does it become all the more requisite to get them out of the way. In with them — haste — lose no time!"

The three men did not require to be thus urged on. They soon dragged the two corpses into the hall, and bore them to the dissecting-room, Maravelli carrying the candle to light them.

"Ah!" ejaculated Kobolt, as he beheld the corpse of the infant already lying on the leaden table, "so you have got that here, eh?"

"We have not a minute for unnecessary discourse," said the doctor. "I have lodgers in the house."

"Well, well," said Kobolt, "not another word. Give us the money, and we are off."

This the doctor did in such haste that he dropped a few more gold pieces than he meant to do into Kobolt's hand, but the fellow did not choose to tell him of the mistake. He and his two comrades accordingly sped away, while the doctor hastened to summon Mavolta to mop up the marks of the wet where the corpses had been dragged through the hall.

Scarcely was all this done, when Loftus came down-stairs, for it was now twelve o'clock. Encountering the doctor in the hall the moment after Mavolta had retired, he was struck by the agitated appearance of his countenance, and at once demanded, "Has anything happened?"

"Only that those fishers of men have brought me two subjects," replied Maravelli, "and I was of course obliged to have them taken into the dissecting-room."

"Well, it cannot be helped. You could not do otherwise, I suppose," said Loftus. "And now give me the key of that room."

"What! to-night?" asked the physician, who was utterly unacquainted with Jocelyn's intention relative to the Misses Owen, and who even did not know that he was expecting them.

"Yes, give me the key, I repeat," rejoined our hero, sternly. "I have visitors coming here to-night."

"Visitors?" echoed Maravelli, struck with a mortal terror, for he fancied that these visitors would prove to be the officers of justice coming to arrest him.

"Ah! they are not such visitors as you fear," said Loftus, at once penetrating his alarms. "Have I not promised that you shall be held scatheless if you do my bidding?"

"Yes, yes, you promised me," murmured the doctor, trembling from head to foot, "but —"

At this moment there was another ring at the front door bell.

"There! these are my visitors," said Loftus, impatiently. "Give me the key. I swear to you they are not officers of justice, they are only the three Owens."

"Oh, in that case take the key," said Maravelli, now breathing more freely.

"And you must remain with me, doctor," hastily rejoined Loftus, "as a witness of what is about to take place."

Our hero now hastened to open the front door, and at once gave admittance to Agatha, Emma, and Julia. They were all three enveloped in cloaks and closely veiled, being thus disguised to escape recognition during their nocturnal expedition from the villa to the physician's house, and (as they hoped) speedily back again.

The moment they entered the hall, Jocelyn closed the front door, and said, "Be pleased to follow me."

He then took up the candle which Maravelli had left standing upon a table in the hall, and at once led the way to the dining-room, keeping the physician close by him.

Be it remembered that the apartment which they had now entered was not the gloomy-looking little parlour previously alluded to, and on the table of which Maravelli had left the bottle of poison.

On entering the dining-room, Loftus closed the door, and turning toward the ladies, he said, "Have the kindness to raise your veils, that I may be assured that ye are really those whom I expect."

With this command, delivered in the firm tone of decision, the three sisters at once complied, and then Loftus beheld those three countenances which were so familiar to him, those countenances on which nature had lavished so much

beauty, but which were now pale and agitated. He also was very pale; indeed, his cheeks were colourless, while the firmness with which his lips were compressed showed that he had some difficulty in mastering his emotions and sternly carrying out that which he believed to be an imperative duty. As for Maravelli, he also was deeply agitated, for though relieved of any immediate fear on his own account, he nevertheless trembled at the strangeness of the present proceeding, and there was likewise something awful in the spectacle of that young man with the determined air of an avenging genius confronting those three pale and horror-stricken girls, at such an hour of the night, and under all the circumstances that had occurred.

"Now," said Loftus, at once resuming the discourse in the same firm voice as before, but likewise with a forced composure over a deep internal agitation, "all that is about to take place must be promptly and rapidly done. To speak the truth, I know you all three too well to believe that you can be brought to a sense of the enormity of your crimes unless under extraordinary circumstances. To the influence of such circumstances am I about to subject you, and here" — pointing to Maravelli — "is the man who, having been to a certain extent implicated in one phase of your proceedings, must perform the part of a witness now. To a chamber of horrors am I about to lead you. Prepare yourselves for a shock. You will behold some ghastly objects, but on one only need your eyes be riveted."

"Mr. Loftus!" almost shrieked forth Agatha, and she would have fallen had not her sisters supported her, "you will not, you cannot, you dare not as a man — "

"Hush, hush!" was the quick whisper which Emma breathed in Agatha's ear. "You must confess nothing, it will be safer not."

"Well, sir," said the eldest sister, regaining her fortitude at this hint, "what horrors are these which you have in preparation for us?" and she threw a ghastly look upon our young hero.

"Not for worlds," exclaimed Loftus, "would I submit you, wicked and depraved though you are, to this ordeal, if I thought you would confess everything of your own accord. Say then at once, — say then," he repeated, earnestly and impressively, "to whom were this man's services adminis-

tered" — and he again glanced toward Maravelli — "on that memorable night, three weeks ago, when a child was born within the walls of the princess's villa?"

Agatha essayed to give some answer, but her tongue refused to perform its office, and she stood gazing in silent horror upon Jocelyn Loftus.

"Ask Doctor Maravelli," said Julia, hastily, "whom he suspects to have been his patient on that memorable night."

"No," immediately exclaimed Loftus, "I require not mere suspicions, I want positive evidence. Remember, this is most serious, and the manner in which it will end depends wholly upon yourselves."

"For God's sake, go through with the ordeal, whatever it may be," whispered Emma, as she stood behind her sister Agatha, whom she half-sustained from sinking upon the carpet.

Agatha instantaneously regained a degree of composure, not so much on account of her sister Emma's encouraging words, as because a sudden idea struck herself. Indeed, she saw that if they were enabled to set Jocelyn at nought in the clue which he had obtained, it might yet be possible to have the whole matter hushed up so as to avoid the necessity of having murder done in respect to Loftus and Lady Prescott. That is to say, if they could manage to leave the circumstance of the childbirth in such doubt and mystery that the princess should still remain an object even of the remotest suspicion, then was it probable that Loftus would be most anxious to avoid public exposure. Such were the thoughts which all in an instant swept through Agatha's mind, and impressed her with the importance of nerving herself to the utmost of her power to meet any horrors and go through any ordeal that might be in store for her sisters and herself.

"Miss Owen," said Loftus, fixing his eyes searchingly upon her, "to you do I especially address the question relative to the birth of that child to which allusion has been made."

"And I, sir," she answered, with a degree of composure that now astonished herself, "refuse to give any response where the honour of a lady is so deeply implicated."

"Then tell me," said Loftus, his voice and his look now assuming the deepest, the most awe-inspiring solemnity,

" will you consent to cast your eyes upon the remains of the infant whereof I am speaking, and all three swear in the presence of the corpse that, had it lived, it would not have been able to assert the claims of nature upon either of you three sisters? "

" We are prepared thus to swear," was Agatha's reply, delivered in a voice so unnaturally firm and with a look so strangely resolute that it seemed as if such preterhuman calmness could only be the prelude to a frightful reaction.

" Come, then," said Loftus, " the sooner the ordeal is over the better. Doctor, take one of the candles and lead on."

Thus speaking, the young man opened the dining-room door, and made way for Maravelli to pass out. He then beckoned the three sisters to follow, and this they did with a degree of firmness which amazed him, although so white were their countenances that they looked like moving corpses.

On issuing into the hall, Loftus hastened to unlock the door of the dissecting-room, and still bidding Maravelli lead the way, he stood aside to see the three sisters enter before him. And they did enter, but the moment they crossed the threshold, and when the sickly odour of the dead struck upon their senses, they shuddered visibly, stopped short, and suddenly turned toward each other, as if all their unnatural courage were now giving way at the supreme moment, and they were about to cling to one another for support. But again was Emma's courage the first to revive, and also to pour its inspiration into the souls of her sisters, for she, having all that Bergami had said uppermost in her mind, was animated with a confidence which they had not the same motive for possessing.

They therefore all three once again armed themselves with the utmost of their fortitude, and in this manner did they advance into the room. Maravelli stood by, holding the light, and Jocelyn Loftus, entering immediately behind the girls, closed the door.

But, ah! what pen can depict the horror that now seized upon those unfortunate young women? Confusion and dismay, anguish and wonderment. While Agatha's eyes remained riveted upon the corpse of her child, the looks of her sisters had been thrown upon those other two dead

bodies that lay there, and as Emma at once recognized the countenance of her late paramour, Colonel Malpas, Julia recoiled in affright from the first glimpse which she caught of the features of the Earl of Curzon. Then did a succession of agonizing shrieks thrill forth, followed by hysterics and fainting.

These were the quick and alarming consequences of the tremendous spectacle. But from the ejaculations of horror and the agonizing syllables which first thrilled from the lips of Emma and Julia, Loftus at once gathered that the dead bodies which by a coincidence that almost seemed providential had been brought hither that night were those of the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas, the two young women's paramours. Cruelly distressed at the turn which the drama had thus taken, having deepened into an excess of horror which he had little foreseen and was very far from intending, he hastened to throw open the door again, and by the doctor's assistance he bore the now fainting girls, one after the other, away from the terrific scene into the dining-room. Agatha, who had instantaneously caught the infection of her two sisters' wild terrors, and whose own nerves had been so painfully distended for some hours past as to be easily unstrung all in a moment, had not swooned outright, as Emma and Julia had done, but had burst forth into a kind of hysterical delirium, in which she unconsciously made all the confessions which Jocelyn Loftus had been so desirous to obtain.

Meanwhile, as we before stated, Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon, unable to retire to rest, were sitting together in the drawing-room. All on a sudden terrific cries, screams, and hysterical shrieks reached their ears, and as in their present state of mind a far less ominous circumstance than even this would have been sufficient to fill their souls with terror, they started up and exchanged looks of fearful import. Conscious guilt invariably associates with itself every occurrence that seems at all threatening, no matter how trivial or how foreign to its actual circumstances it may be. Thus was it that an indescribable horror, mingled with dread misgivings, seized at once upon the two patrician murderesses, and made them spring up from their seats as if suddenly galvanized. The screams continuing, the two ladies went forth on the landing. They heard the names of Curzon and Malpas thrilling forth upon voices fraught with

rending anguish, and now their souls seemed to burn with the scathing effects of ineffable terror. The voice of the doctor was heard vociferating to Mavolta to bring water, vinegar, and smelling-salts; and the quick sounds of footsteps through the hall, as the physician and Jocelyn conveyed the wretched girls to the dining-room, all tended to prove that something unusual, strange, and extraordinary was going on.

Wild with alarm, and their feelings now excited to a pitch utterly beyond endurance, Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon descended the stairs. On reaching the hall, they beheld two doors standing open, and from both of which lights were streaming. One of these doors Lady Prescott had never seen open before all the time she had been at the doctor's house, and perceiving that the other door which stood open was that of the dining-room, it naturally struck her that the shrieks of anguish she had heard had proceeded from the former place ere those who had uttered them were borne into the latter apartment. Quick as thought alone can travel did this idea strike her, and, impelled by a curiosity now excited to a fearful, indeed, to an awful pitch, she hastened toward that door which stood open at the end of the passage leading from the hall. Lady Curzon, inspired by kindred feelings, mechanically followed her, and together did they enter the dissecting-room, where the candle which Maravelli had left upon the table at once showed them the fearful objects that lay stretched on that anatomical board.

For the corpse of the child they had no eyes or thoughts. All their attention, all their interest, all their ideas were in a moment riveted and absorbed in the dread spectacle of their two murdered victims lying there stretched out before them.

For nearly a minute did they stand gazing in mute horror, their countenances ghastly pale, and with a paleness, too, which settling upon their olive complexions gave to their features a corpselike hue similar to the faces of the dead. Then, as if simultaneously seized with the same goading terror, they turned away, exchanging a quick look of indescribable feelings, and passed forth into the hall again. As they proceeded side by side along the passage, they threw quick, shuddering glances over their shoulders, in dire apprehension lest something should be following close behind.

In the confusion and dismay which prevailed inside the dining-room, where Mavolta and the doctor were administering restoratives to Emma and Julia, and where Agatha was giving vent to her hysterical revealings, the door, as already stated, had been left open. The eldest sister's confessions were at this moment absorbing the entire attention of Jocelyn Loftus, and he observed not that the door was thus open, neither did he hear the sounds of footsteps nor the rustling of garments as Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon were staggering past that open door, scarcely knowing whither they went, but both alike a prey to feelings which defied description.

The door of the sombre-looking little parlour, of which we have frequently spoken, was also standing ajar, and a light glimmered from within. Mechanically did the two ladies enter there, for they felt that their limbs were failing them and that they must sink with the exhaustion of terror and dismay unless they reached some place where they could sit down. Lady Prescott threw herself into an armchair, an example which was instantaneously followed by the Countess of Curzon. Then with hollow eyes did they gaze upon each other, as if to ask what was to be done, for they both felt profoundly and terribly conscious of danger, although they knew not how to define it or whence it was to come.

"The lake has given up its dead," whispered Lady Prescott, in accents low and hollow. "Is not this ominous of something dreadful?"

"Yes, my God! dreadful, dreadful!" returned Editha, wringing her hands. "Oh, that the work of the last few hours could be undone!"

"Know you," asked Lady Prescott, under the influence of a tremendous consternation, "what is the punishment in Geneva — for — for —"

"For the crime of murder?" added Lady Curzon, mechanically.

"Yes, the guillotine," answered Lady Prescott, with wild, staring eyes.

"O horror!" rejoined the wretched Editha, shuddering with an ice-chill from head to foot.

"Ah!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, as her eye fell upon the bottle which stood on the table.

"What is it?" quickly demanded the countess. Then, as she also caught sight of the label, she said, "Here, give it to me. It is Satan himself who has put it in my way. I am tired of life — I am frightened to live. The guillotine — my God! The guillotine — oh, no, no!"

And seizing the bottle from Lady Prescott's hand, the Countess of Curzon applied it to her lips.

"Ah! leave enough for me also," cried Lady Prescott, snatching the phial from her; but for a moment she stood transfixed with horror as she beheld the Countess of Curzon sink suddenly back in her chair and with one deep groan give up the ghost, for the poison was rapid and fatal in its effects as the dart of the angel of death.

All imaginable horrors, ten thousand times more fearful than any which had yet seized on the wretched Lady Prescott, now crowded in upon her. Death in every shape seemed to be within that house, — death in the dissecting-room, death now in this gloomy parlour, before her eyes and in her imagination, death out-of-doors, in the middle of the great square of Geneva, and on the scaffold of the guillotine. Oh, the guillotine — heavens! what a thrill of ice-like agony did the idea, as it again flashed to her mind, send through her entire form, so that maddened, frenzied, driven wild with the pressure of intolerable thoughts, the unhappy lady raised the phial to her lips and poured the residue of its contents down her throat. The effect was blasting as a flash of lightning. Not more quickly does the thunderstroke of apoplexy perform its tremendous work — and down she fell, a corpse.

Meantime the hysterical cries which still came thrilling from Agatha's lips and went penetrating through the entire house reached the ears of the Countess of Curzon's lady's-maid, who slept on an upper story. This was none other than Gertrude, the handsome and wily Gertrude, who is already so well known to our readers. Terrified and dismayed at those sounds of female anguish which struck cry after cry, and with shriek following shriek, in quick succession upon her ears, she leaped forth from her couch, hastily threw on some clothing, and descended the stairs. Guided by the cries, she came down as far as the hall, and halting near the dining-room door, listened to what was taking place within. She heard Agatha's unconscious and hysterical confessions, —

how it was indeed she who had given birth to the child whose corpse was in the dissecting-room, and Gertrude shuddered as she thus listened to those wild ravings relative to the dead.

While casting her eyes in the vagueness of a growing terror around, she observed the other doors which stood open, and catching a glimpse of the sinister shapes that lay on the table in the dissecting-room, thither was she impelled by a fearful curiosity, as terrible as it was irresistible. Entering that room, she beheld the child to which allusion had just been made in her hearing, and she also beheld the two corpses that lay stretched on the same table. Heavens! one was Malpas, her mistress's enemy, and the other was her mistress's husband. Yes, there was the Earl of Curzon, stark and lifeless, — he who had revelled in the virginity of Gertrude's own charms, there he lay, a mere inanimate heap.

Gertrude stood confounded. Of the double crime perpetrated that night by her mistress and Lady Prescott at the old jetty, she knew not; therefore well indeed might she be amazed and thus transfixed with mingled wonderment and horror on beholding those two corpses stretched out there. Staggering away, not knowing what to think, scarcely daring to think at all, but with terrible suspicions springing up in her mind, she retraced her steps into the hall, and, still guided by the irresistible feeling of curiosity which amounted almost to a presentiment, she advanced toward the parlour door. But now, as she reached the threshold of that sombre-looking little room, a cry, a wild and terrible cry, thrilling high above the hysterical outpourings of Agatha in the dining-room, burst agonizingly from the lips of the lady's-maid, as with the first glance her eyes embraced all the horrors of the scene. For there sat her mistress in a large armchair, already livid and ghastly with the changing hues of a death produced by a quick and powerful poison, while on the floor, with glassy eyes that seemed to stare up at her awfully, was stretched Lady Prescott, also becoming hideous beneath the finger of death.

Something seemed to give way in Gertrude's brain as she sent forth that thrilling, rending, piercing cry; then she stood motionless and silent for a few instants, and then, as persons issued from the drawing-room, the horrible laugh of a maniac burst from her lips.

Oh, this indeed was a night of horrors at Maravelli's house! The suicide of the two ladies seemed the crowning act of the tremendous drama thus represented there. Jocelyn and the doctor were the two persons who had rushed forth from the dining-room on hearing Gertrude's yelling cry, and we need scarcely say that they were overwhelmed with unutterable dismay on beholding the tragedy which had taken place. Loftus was the first to recover his presence of mind, and in a few quick but impressive words he conjured the doctor to summon likewise all his fortitude to his aid, inasmuch as it was absolutely necessary to conceal from the three sisters this new incident which had occurred, lest the accumulation of so much horror upon horror, beneath the same roof and within the same hour, should prove more than their minds could possibly bear up against.

Mavolta was accordingly summoned forth from the dining-room to take charge of Gertrude, now a laughing, senseless maniac, and the unhappy creature was induced to follow the old housekeeper up the stairs. The door of the little parlour was closed on the corpses of the two suicide ladies; and all this having been done in the course of a few minutes, the doctor and Loftus returned into the dining-room, where the three sisters were now huddling together upon a sofa and endeavouring to imbibe confidence from each other's presence, as well as collect their ideas so as to look their actual position in the face. For Agatha had by this time grown calm, yielding to the consolations, the entreaties, and the prayers of her two sisters, who had been recovered from the fainting condition into which they had fallen.

"Young ladies," said Loftus, on returning into the room with the doctor, "you need remain here no longer than you choose."

"But what are we to expect, Mr. Loftus? What are we to anticipate?" inquired Agatha, who was still nervous and trembling all over.

"You must prepare to quit Geneva to-morrow," answered Jocelyn. "Understand me well, to-morrow must yourselves" — and he glanced rapidly at the three sisters one after the other — "take your departure from this city in company with Mrs. Ranger. Now you understand me, and I have no more to say. Unless, indeed," he added, after an instant's pause, "you feel that in consequence of the terrible scenes

which have taken place you would rather remain here for a while longer."

"No, no," cried Emma, impatiently, for now that her fortitude was returning, she recollected her appointment with Bergami. "Let us hasten hence this moment. Agatha, Julia," she added, in quick whispers, to her two sisters, "let us depart now directly."

They all three accordingly signified their desire to go thence, and Loftus, taking the candle in his hand, conducted them to the front door without uttering another word. But just as they were about to issue forth, he bethought himself of something which he ought to say in his own justification, for not even to such vile, depraved, and heartless girls as these did he choose to appear in the light of a man capable of unnecessary cruelty.

"One moment," he said, just closing the door ajar ere the three sisters stepped forth from the house. "It is due to myself to inform you that the additional horrors of that room" — and he glanced toward the dissecting apartment — "formed no portion of my plan. Had I known whose remains those were that had been brought in by the resurrectionists of the lake, not for an instant should I have suffered you to enter thither."

Having thus spoken, he again opened the door, and the three sisters, drawing down their veils and huddling close together, issued forth from Maravelli's house just as the neighbouring church clock was chiming a quarter to one. Thus was it that they had passed through three-quarters of an hour of horrible feelings and rending mental tortures within those walls, and the silence, the darkness, and the loneliness of the by-street into which they now emerged constituted an indescribable relief after the whirl of harrowing emotions they had experienced.

After having thus afforded egress to the three sisters, Jocelyn Loftus hastened back into the dining-room where he had left Maravelli, and to whom he now said, "I am going out for an hour or two."

"Going out!" echoed the doctor, all his suspicions of evil suddenly reviving.

"Tranquillize yourself, I shall be back in a couple of hours, long before the city awakes for the business of a new day. Doctor Maravelli," added our hero, in a solemn voice, and

with a still more solemn look, " the last hour has been one of horrors such as I never knew before, such as God grant that I may never know again. Our duty is clear and apparent. So soon as the police courts are open, we must repair to the authorities and relate everything that has occurred."

" Everything? " cried Maravelli, with haggard look.

" Depend upon it," rejoined Loftus, " I will save you from any unpleasant consequences. I have promised you this already, and I will keep my word."

He then put on his hat, muffled himself in a cloak, and issued forth from the physician's house.

Meanwhile the three sisters were hastening back to the villa. Emma, who relied upon the protection of Bergami, but who did not choose to inform her sisters of all that had taken place between herself and him, said everything she could think of to inspire them with an equal amount of courage and assurance. She represented to them that now the ordeal was past, the worst was known, and that all the harm or exposure Loftus intended them was their prompt exile from Geneva.

" But even this decision may be counteracted," added Emma, in a peculiar tone of assurance, which was derived from the secret reliance she placed in Bergami.

Through the eldest sister's frame, however, did a sudden thrill of horror sweep as she recalled to mind Mrs. Ranger's injunction relative to Loftus and Lady Prescott. " If they are to live, then must you find the opportunity of breathing the word to Maravelli; but if they are to die, then nothing need be said and the doctor will do his work."

Such were the words Mrs. Ranger had whispered to Agatha during their interview of the evening, but the word had not been breathed in Maravelli's ear, and he therefore would do his work.

Ah! if Agatha only knew that Lady Prescott was already no more, that the poison had been used by suicide lips, and that Maravelli no longer dreamed of new crimes, but only thought of shielding the past ones, she would have been spared this fresh paroxysm of horror and dismay which now seized upon her. But, stricken speechless thereby, she gave no audible vent to her feelings, and as she thus walked with her two sisters in silence, they in the obscurity of night observed not the ghastly workings of her countenance.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LAST ACT OF THE NIGHT'S TRAGEDY

It is here necessary to remind the reader that when Bergami had absented himself from the dinner-table at the villa, under pretence of dining with a friend, it was for the purpose of hastening to Doctor Maravelli's house and making Jocelyn Loftus acquainted with all that had taken place during the few hours since they parted in the middle of the day. Thus Bergami had informed our hero of all the strange and startling revelations which he had wrung from Mrs. Hubbard, and all that had taken place between himself and the three sisters on the shore of the lake. He had also explained to Loftus, word for word, what he had said and done when left alone with Emma Owen, and ere they parted it was then agreed that Loftus should repair to the villa during the night, immediately after his interview should have taken place with the three young ladies at Doctor Maravelli's.

It was in pursuance of this understanding with Bergami that Jocelyn Loftus was now wending his way from the physician's house toward the villa, and while the three sisters were returning thither by the most direct route, our hero was taking the more circuitous path across the field. But then, as he proceeded at a much quicker pace than the Misses Owen, he arrived at the point of destination before them.

On reaching the private door in the garden wall, he knocked three times, and it was immediately opened by Bergami, who had been there awaiting his coming for the last half-hour. In a few hurried words Jocelyn related to the royal equerry all the dreadful things that had occurred, and how the drama of the night had episodically merged

into a terrific tragedy in respect to Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon. Bergami was horror-stricken on hearing of these frightful incidents, but as there was now little leisure for comment, he proceeded without loss of time to conduct Jocelyn into the villa. Ascending the back staircase together, they trod noiselessly, so as not to attract attention in case the sisters should have already entered or Mrs. Ranger should be upon the alert. But all was still, no one appeared, and Bergami led the way to his own chamber.

"I have come," said Jocelyn, as he threw off his cloak and hat, "because of the appointment which we made, but I should scarcely think that Emma will have the hardihood to perform the part which she promised you, considering everything that has occurred."

"But methought you said in the garden ere now," observed Bergami, "that you concealed the crowning tragedy from the sisters in consideration of their state of mind?"

"I did so," answered Loftus. "But the spectacle of her murdered paramour —"

"Murdered, did you say?" cried Bergami, starting with horror.

"Yes, Colonel Malpas and also the Earl of Curzon were most foully murdered," rejoined our hero. "The marks of the fatal wounds were upon them — Ah! and must we not associate the suicide of those ladies with the dread crime of murder committed upon these two men?"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Bergami, "what horrors are growing out of these adventures wherein we are engaged! But did the spectacle of her murdered paramour produce so very powerful an impression upon Emma?"

"Rather of horror than of grief," rejoined Loftus. "I noticed, moreover, that she was the first to resume her fortitude —"

"Then depend upon it she will keep her appointment with me to-night," interrupted Bergami.

"You speak with confidence, baron," said Loftus, "and I hope that it will prove as you conjecture. For if this one point be cleared up, then are our investigations complete in all their details. Agatha confessed, as I ere now told you in the garden, that she was the mother of the babe. She moreover admitted in her ravings that it was her sisters who

personated the princess in the ermine cloak and the green silk hood, which they had been enabled by their position about the royal person to borrow for the specific occasions when they were used."

"Oh, what refinement of atrocious perfidy!" exclaimed the baron, trembling with indignation.

"Let our consolation be that we have unravelled the complicated skein so successfully," observed Loftus, "and now it is the last knot which we are about to untie — that is to say, if Emma should really come."

"I am convinced of it," said Bergami, with the same air of confidence as before. "That young woman is devoured with insatiable passions; she is a perfect Messalina in her desires. Ah! Mr. Loftus, you can understand me when I assure you that never, never did I do such violence to my feelings in every respect as when affecting to fall into the snare which that siren spread for me. I hated the hypocrisy of the part which I was playing, hated it all the more bitterly because I was compelled to assume the passion of love where I in reality experienced nought but loathing and aversion. For beautiful as that young creature is, yet did her very touch send a cold shudder through me as if from the contact of a reptile. At the time that I was playing that hypocritical part and forcing myself to enact the character of a gross sensualist, it seemed to me as if I were committing a crime. And then to permit her even for a moment to enfold me in her embrace — O God! it was dreadful!" and the strong aversion which penetrated through Bergami's accents and looks showed how really and truly his exalted nature recoiled from the degrading sensuality belonging to the part which he had enacted. "But I had assured you, Mr. Loftus," he continued, "that I would have recourse to every means in order to further our views, for it was the honour of a persecuted and injured princess that had to be vindicated, and I was therefore prepared to go any lengths and make any sacrifice of my own feeling in order to accomplish that aim. I can assure you, however, it was the martyrdom of all my manly sense of propriety when I allowed myself to be pressed to that luxurious wanton's bosom. And it is because she is this utter profligate, this lascivious creature that you and I both know her to be, it is for this reason, I say, that she will presently forget all the horrors of the last

few hours, and giving the reins to her imagination, think of abandoning herself only to voluptuous delights."

"We shall see," observed Jocelyn. "The night is wearing on, they must have returned by this time, and if she mean to seek your chamber she will be here soon."

Baron Bergami was right. Even while retracing her way with her sisters from Maravelli's house to the villa did Emma give full scope to her licentious imaginings. She thought within herself that the pains of the night being over, the hour for its pleasures was now approaching, and in Bergami's arms did she hope to reap the reward of all that she had just undergone.

The three sisters stealthily reëntered the villa, and immediately separating from each other, they sought their respective chambers. But Agatha, according to previous understanding, repaired in the first instance to Mrs. Ranger's room, and there she found the old harridan sitting up and anxiously awaiting her return. There was a screen drawn around one corner of the chamber, and as Agatha entered, Mrs. Ranger pointed significantly in that direction. A cold shudder thrilled through the young lady's frame as she full easily comprehended what the sign meant, namely, that Kobolt and his two companions were concealed behind that screen.

"Now, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger, of course speaking in English and also in a low voice, "tell me in as few words as you can all that has taken place."

The young lady sat down on a chair close to the old one, and rapidly outlined the horrors through which she and her sisters had passed, as a matter of course not forgetting to describe how they had beheld the forms of the murdered Curzon and Malpas stretched upon the table in the doctor's dissecting-room. Mrs. Ranger was astounded at this portion of the narrative, the crime being characterized by so much real mystery in every respect. But she was not a woman likely to devote much time to speculation and conjecture when it became necessary to act with decision. She accordingly asked, "How stands the matter, Agatha? What words spoke you in Maravelli's ear?"

"I said nothing," was the response. "I was too much the prey to the wildest emotions of terror and grief to be

able to settle my thoughts on any particular point. It quite escaped me, in the whirl of my ideas, that the lives of Loftus and Lady Prescott were, so to speak, in my own hand."

"Well, then, it is perhaps all for the better," said Mrs. Ranger, with the doggedness of determination. "Dead people tell no tales, and therefore it is better that the tongues of Loftus and Lady Prescott should be silenced than that we should be at their mercy. Since you did not speak the word, Maravelli will do his work. And now," she added, with an emphasis and a look both alike of darkest meaning, "I shall do mine."

"You — you — are resolved, then?" faltered Agatha, glancing with uncontrollable horror toward the screen, from behind which the rustling of garments and the whispering of coarse voices came.

"To be sure," rejoined Mrs. Ranger. "If Loftus and Lady Prescott are to die to-night, how is it possible to allow Bergami to live?"

Agatha spoke not another word, but for nearly a minute she stood gazing in vacant terror upon Mrs. Ranger, not only in astonishment at the extraordinary firmness of that woman at other times so frivolous and full of affectations, but also as much as to ask whether it was possible that a murder so foul, so cold-blooded, was to be done that night within the walls of the villa.

"Retire, Agatha, retire," said Mrs. Ranger, at length, "and in less than half an hour from this time all will be over."

Agatha still remained speechless; her tongue was parched, her throat was dry, as if she had been swallowing ashes, and yet it seemed that if she even for a single moment relaxed the strong hold that she was maintaining upon her feelings, she must give full vent to her anguish in one long, loud, and penetrating scream.

Mrs. Ranger pushed her gently toward the door, and Agatha, quitting the chamber, dragged herself along the passage to her own room, where, locking the door, she threw herself upon the couch, and burying her face in the pillow to stifle her cries, gave vent to all the tremendous anguish that for the last quarter of an hour had gathered and remained pent up in her almost bursting bosom.

Meanwhile the voluptuous Emma, immediately on gaining her own apartments, had hastened to throw off her apparel. Then unlocking a wardrobe, she took thence a frock coat, a military stock, a pair of trousers with a stripe of gold lace on the outward seam of each leg, a pair of Wellington boots, and a hat.

If any one could have peeped into the chamber at this moment and beheld that young woman undoing her feminine toilet and preparing for her masculine one, it would have been impossible to believe that she had gone through such a severe trial as she had so recently experienced. Upon her countenance was no trace of those feelings which had ere now been so vividly excited at Maravelli's house. On the contrary, the flush of a blissful animation was upon her cheeks, the light of pleasure flashed from beneath the silken fringes of her hazel eyes, a sunny smile sat upon her lips, which, so far from being dry and feverish with recent horror, were moist as wet coral and delicious as a rich, pulpy fruit. Her bosom rose and fell with quick heavings, but not indicative of either affliction or alarm. No, those voluptuous undulations of that superb bust were produced by the anticipations of love's delight which fired the soul within.

She disapparelled herself, we say, of all her feminine gear, and then began to assume the masculine garb which she knew became her so well. Even to her very corset had she laid aside, and though the rich contours of her bust depended not upon artificial support or compression for their shape, roundness, or firmness, yet was it now easier to imprison those glowing globes of snow within the tightly fitting frock coat. The Wellington boots, made with such exquisite delicacy, fitted her beautifully shaped feet in the most faultless manner, the upper leathers ascending to the middle of the swell of her robust but admirably modelled legs. The pantaloons, however, were made somewhat wide and with large plaits, so as to conceal the feminine shapeliness of the limbs, and give them the appearance of that undeviating straightness which especially characterizes the male figure. Her hair was arranged in such a manner as to flow in a luxuriant mass upon her shoulders, and when this was done, she proceeded by the aid of gum-water to fasten a pair of false whiskers in their proper place. This she did with an air so coquettish, so full of arch delight, that it was

less possible than ever to believe she had undergone such exciting fluctuations of feeling during the few past hours. But now came another of the finishing touches to the masculine toilet, namely, the fastening on of the exquisitely fashioned false moustache. Above her short upper lip did she affix it in the most artistic manner, and then, as she gazed at herself in the mirror, with that delicately pencilled, glossy, and curling appendage to her luscious mouth, she fancied that it gave a more mischievous expression to her features and a delightful archness to her smile. Resplendent as pearls already were her beautiful teeth, but if it were possible, that dark moustache made them appear still more brilliant by the contrast; and when she fastened below the nether lip, just where the chin formed its beauteous dimple, another little artificial contrivance of hair to serve as an imperial, her delight became absolutely childish. Indeed, as she surveyed herself in the full-length mirror before which her masculine toilet was achieved, she looked like a radiant being without a care, and who had never even known what a ruffled feeling was, dressing for some masquerade where she was to enjoy the full measure of characteristic delight.

Long as it has taken us to describe the process of this toilet, it did not occupy Emma above twenty minutes altogether, and now, as she threw a last look at herself, she murmured, with an air of supreme satisfaction, "Never did this attire seem to become me so much before."

And truly it did become her well, setting forth the exquisite symmetry of her shape without concealing its feminine contours. Indeed, it could be but at a distance, or in an obscure light, and when only a hasty glance was thrown upon her, that she could be taken for one of the male sex, much less Bergami himself, whose noble height she altogether wanted. Besides, it were easy to perceive, when gazing close or in a clear light, that she was a female disguised, not merely from the delicacy, the softness, and the polish of her skin, nor from the seductive look of wantonness which beamed in her mischievous eyes and shed the subdued light of soft sensuousness over her entire countenance, whiskered and moustached though it were, but it was also from the rich development of that bust which the tight fitting frock could not possibly flatten and only partially restrain and compress. But even as she drew herself up to her full height,

and, by throwing back her shoulders, endeavoured to make the most of a stature which was not even tall for a woman, it seemed as if with the expansion thus given to the chest the glowing orbs would burst forth from their prisonage, and in this manner did the projecting development of bust, apart from all other circumstances above detailed, betray the woman in the masculine garb.

We will not, however, linger at greater length upon a portraiture which assuredly had its delicious attractions. Sad, oh, sad, indeed is it to reflect that this creature so lovely was not so virtuous as she was beautiful, that this being so seductive was not so chaste as she was fascinating.

The masculine toilet, then, being completed, Emma Owen prepared to sally forth from her chamber. One last look did she fling upon the mirror where her symmetrical and, at the same time, voluptuous shape was so faithfully reproduced upon the polished surface, and with her spirits elevated to the highest pitch through the very feeling of satisfaction which she experienced, she turned away and issued from the room. Ah! how her heart palpitated now with the anticipation of ineffable joys, as she pictured to herself the handsome Bergami, who, as she thought, was in a few brief minutes to strain her, warm, palpitating, and glowing with love and passion, in his arms, that handsome Bergami whose miniature counterpart she had apparelled herself to seem!

The passage was feebly, very feebly lighted by the lamp that burned there, but which was now flickering toward extinction. Indeed, the gloom was so deep that it would have been impossible to discern a figure a dozen yards ahead. All was silent in the villa, silent as the grave, as Emma stole with noiseless steps along the corridor.

But suddenly she pauses and listens. That deep silence has just been broken by a sound as of the turning of the handle of a door. Yes, she cannot be mistaken, it is so, and, moreover, it is the door of Mrs. Ranger's rooms whence the sound emanates. It opens, a head peeps forth, it is Mrs. Ranger's, and the next instant it is withdrawn again. But the words, "'Tis he, now in the passage!" uttered with exceeding rapidity by Mrs. Ranger inside the room reached Emma's ears, and she, instantaneously fancying that the

old lady was positively and actually taking her this time for Bergami himself, laughed inwardly as she continued her way along the passage.

Once more all was quiet. Mrs. Ranger's door had closed again, and Emma did not choose to waste a single moment in inquiring why the old lady was up still, and what she was doing when peeping forth into the passage. No, not an instant could Emma spare from the time which was now so precious, and was to be devoted as soon as possible to the delights of love.

And now the door of Bergami's apartment was gained, and Emma was about to knock gently with her delicate fingers, when she suddenly became aware of the stealthy creeping of some one near her. She turned around abruptly, and the look she threw was the last that ever flashed from her eyes in this life. For at the same moment her throat was grasped by hands of such iron strength that the cry which rose up in her terror was stifled in an instant, utterly subdued, ere even the very breath on which it was to be wafted forth could issue from the quivering lips. Simultaneously with this vigorous and effective assault, a long, sharp dagger was driven deep down into the unfortunate young woman's bosom, and penetrating her heart, death was instantaneous.

This fearful deed occupied not a minute, and so noiselessly was it performed that Mrs. Ranger, who was inside her room holding the door ajar and listening attentively, could scarcely hear the sound of even the faintest struggle. But, nevertheless, there was just a sufficiency of noise to reach the ears of Bergami and Loftus within the room at the door of which the tremendous tragedy took place. Thinking, however, it was Emma groping her way thither, perhaps in the dark, they only opened the door gently. But as the light strained forth from the chamber, what a spectacle met their view! Cries of horror burst from their lips, and at the same time their ears caught the sounds of rapidly retreating footsteps.

Then rang the alarm of murder through the house, that terrific cry bursting like the knell of doom upon the ears of startled sleepers in the depth of the night. But along the passage sped Loftus and Bergami, down the stairs they precipitated themselves, and on the landing below they

overtook the three assassins, upon whom they seized and who turned to defend themselves. Here it was pitch-dark and the struggle took place in the dense obscurity. Loftus and Bergami, having each grappled with his man, held them fast with desperate tenacity, and a third remained to attempt the rescue of friends, but dared not use his dagger to stab at random in the dark lest he should wound them instead of their assailants. As for the two men themselves who were thus seized upon, so firmly were they pinioned by our hero and the royal equerry that though violent were their struggles, yet were their arms held fast and they could not use their weapons.

In less than a minute the villa was all alive, doors were opening, female voices were heard giving vent to deafening shrieks, and the men-servants came rushing down from the uppermost stories. Lights were brought to the scene of action, and there Hernani and Walden were found safe pinioned in the grasp of Bergami and Loftus, while Kobolt, the moment the gleam of the first light flashed upon the figure of the royal equerry, was seized with so mortal a terror that he staggered against the wall, his limbs becoming as heavy as lead and disabling him from flight. For it naturally struck him that this was the same person whom but a minute or two back he had felt assured that he had left dead at the end of the passage below.

The capture of the three men was now effected without much difficulty by the aid of the domestics who appeared upon the scene, and from something which Kobolt in his terror and bewilderment let fall from his lips, Loftus and Bergami at once proceeded to Mrs. Ranger's room. They knocked at the door, and in a voice of alarm from within she asked, " Who is there? "

" Open, madam, open! " exclaimed Loftus, in a commanding tone.

" No, no, I cannot, I am undressed," half-screamed the wretched woman, all her courage breaking down in a moment, for it struck her that the murderers had been arrested and that everything was discovered.

Without another word did Bergami and Jocelyn burst open the door, and instead of finding Mrs. Ranger disapparelled, they at once perceived that she had not laid aside a single article of raiment, nor made the slightest prepara-

tion to retire to rest. From their looks did she gather the full confirmation of all her direst terrors and falling at their feet she extended her arms, crying, " Mercy, mercy! "

" Wretched woman! " exclaimed Bergami, " what horrors have you been guilty of! Murderess that you are, what pardon can there be for you? "

Mrs. Ranger heard no more, her senses were abandoning her, and with a hollow moan of deepest despair, she sank down in a deathlike swoon.

Meanwhile a distressing, oh, a wildly distressing scene had occurred close by. Alarmed along with the rest of the household by the cry of murder which Loftus and Bergami had sent forth, Agatha and Julia had issued from their chambers to find that their sister, from whom they had parted but little more than half an hour back in the fulness of vigorous health, was now a lifeless, bleeding corpse. Oh, what ineffable anguish was now experienced by those young women, and how tremendous was the remorse that sprang up in their guilty souls on perceiving at the first glance that one of the very means adopted to achieve the ruin of the princess had rebounded upon their own heads. For they understood it all: their unfortunate sister had been mistaken for Bergami, and attired in the apparel wherewith she was wont to personate him, had thus met a premature and dreadful death.

But we must draw a veil, at least for the present, over the manifold feelings excited by the incidents of this dreadful night. Suffice it to say that the police authorities were immediately fetched from Geneva, that Mrs. Ranger and the three murderers were borne off to prison, and that Agatha and Julia, now in a state bordering upon frenzy, were left at the villa under the surveillance of an officer of justice.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SPONGING-HOUSE

In a dirty, dingy-looking, dust-begrimed parlour at Mr. Moses Ikey's sponging-house in Fetter Lane Mr. Emmerson was pacing to and fro. Bars were at the windows, and though the sun was shining brightly, for it was midday, its beams were deadened by the dirty medium of the window-panes, which appeared as if they had not been washed outside since the last rain, a fortnight back, while their inner side appeared utterly innocent of any contact with water at all. The furniture was heavy and massive, but in a sadly neglected condition; indeed, it was impossible to walk a step on the carpet without raising a cloud of dust, or to place the finger anywhere without leaving a spot where the dust was thus lifted away.

The door was kept locked, and whenever Mr. Emmerson wanted anything, he had to ring the bell about a dozen times before the summons was answered. Then, when a dirty girl with red hair and an unmistakable Hebrew physiognomy did condescend to make her appearance, she took double the time to procure what he asked for. If he required to take exercise, he had to descend into a little yard at the back of the house, about sixteen feet wide by thirty in length, and having an arched iron grating overhead, so that it seemed like walking to and fro in a cage.

Exactly three weeks had Mr. Emmerson been at the sponging-house, raising heaven and earth to extricate himself from his pecuniary difficulties, in order that he might escape out of the country before the forgery should be discovered. But each day beheld his position growing more and more hopeless, and refusals as well as rebuffs came from every quarter to which he thought of applying. He had induced

his wife to make an earnest appeal to her relations for a loan, but here again a negative was experienced. Executions were put into the house at Clapham, everything was swept away, furniture, plate, horses, carriages, all the emblems, symbols, and appurtenances of luxury and ostentation, away they went. The ruin was complete, and Mrs. and Miss Emmerson, after having cut such a dash in that neighbourhood, were compelled to sneak away in a hackney-coach after dusk, a trunk and a bandbox containing the few articles of clothing which they had been enabled to abstract from the greedy grasp of the sheriff's officers. Then taking refuge in a small furnished lodging in Fetter Lane, so as to be near Emmerson, the unhappy women were taught the bitter lesson of overweening pride in its ignominious fall.

Three weeks, we say, had Emmerson been in the sponging-house, and so far from progressing a step toward emancipating himself from his difficulties, each day, each hour, beheld him sinking more deeply down. It is true that he had nearly two thousand guineas about his person, and the fact of which he could not conceal from his wife and daughter, although he begrudged them the few shillings which he doled out for their support. He husbanded every farthing as closely as he could, in the hope of being enabled to settle with his detaining creditor, so as to quit the country ere the forgery should be discovered, for in those times the punishment of forgery was death.

It was noon, on the twenty-first day of his captivity, that we thus find him pacing to and fro with agitated step in the private room at the sponging-house. Be it remembered that the forged bill was drawn at twenty-one days' after date, but then there were the three days' grace, and it wanted then exactly these three days to the time when the discovery of the forgery would be inevitable. Three days had the wretched Emmerson to save himself from the scaffold. Heavens, what a brief interval for the accomplishment of so gigantic a task! And the guilty man felt that it was so. Hence the fearful state of excitement in which we now find him, pacing to and fro, turning and turning with a restless, horrible anxiety.

He had sent his wife to make a communication to his detaining creditor, which he hoped would have the effect of inducing that individual to come to terms, and he was now

awaiting, in excruciating suspense, the issue of his wife's errand. Presently she returned, and the moment she made her appearance in the room, Emmerson devoured her with his inquiring eyes.

She was an affected, vulgar woman, of no very prepossessing appearance, and even in her poverty still clung to a certain tawdriness which but ill supplied the place of vanished splendour. Throwing herself upon a chair, she began by complaining bitterly of the dreadful nuisance of having to walk through the crowded streets after having been accustomed to ride in her carriage, but Emmerson cut her short by demanding sharply whether she had seen his detaining creditor.

"Yes, I have," she answered, apparently indifferent to her husband's acute suspense, which she could not fail to perceive, although she was very far from suspecting the crime whose terrors had rendered it so poignant.

"Well, what did you tell him, and what did he say?" demanded Emmerson, sharply. "Will he come to terms? Yes or no?"

"I can't say for positive," was the response given by his wife. "He will send up and let you know presently."

"Presently! Good God! more suspense, more agony of waiting!" muttered Emmerson to himself, and for a moment he felt that he could have screamed out, that he could have fastened his hands in his hair and torn it by the roots, as if, indeed, he were going mad; but subduing his emotions with a mighty effort which in itself was agony, he turned again to his wife, saying, "Tell me everything, what you said to him, how he took it, how he looked, the very words he uttered in reply."

"Lor, my dear, how very particular you are!" said his wife. "One would really think that instead of being only in a lockup house you was in Newgate, and instead of standing the chances of going to the King's Bench you was afraid of going to the scaffold. But gracious goodness, Emmerson, don't look at me like that. You positively frighten me."

"It's nothing — nothing," said her husband, in a low, hoarse voice, and indeed he felt that his looks were ghastly at the moment, for the sensations which tortured him were the concentrated essence of ten thousand agonies. "Tell

me, I say, all that took place between you and the man who keeps me here."

"Well, I will," said Mrs. Emmerson. "I found him in his counting-house, and told him who I was. His looks immediately became quite glum, and his manner as stiff as possible. I said I wanted to speak to him very particular. I then told him you had exactly eighteen hundred and fifty guineas, which you would give him to let you out; if not, you meant to become bankrupt at once and give the money up to all your creditors, so that there wouldn't be two shillings in the pound."

"And what did he say then? How did he look?" demanded Emmerson, eagerly. "Did it seem to touch him? I am sure he must have unbent a little. Tell me, did he not unbend?" and the wretched man, in his soul's writhings, was thus straining madly to catch at the slightest straw of hope in his sinking desperation.

"No, I can't say that he did," replied his wife, who, entertaining not the least affection for her husband, did not think it necessary to invent a consolation which existed not.

"Ah! he did not unbend, then? But did he seem to believe you?"

"It's difficult to say, because he looked so cold and stiff."

"Well, then, what on earth did he say?"

"He appeared to consider for about a minute; then he opened a great book, turned to the letter E, ran his finger down a column, and stopping at a particular place, said that you owed him three thousand four hundred guineas, besides the expenses, and that before he gave any decision he must consult a friend."

"Ah! a friend," muttered Emmerson, between his set teeth, as his thoughts fixed themselves on Varian, "a friend perhaps to him, but a bitter, unrelenting foe to me!" Then again turning to his wife, he said, aloud, "Well, what next?"

"Nothing more, only that he would let you know in the course of the day, and then he opened the door for me to go out. So as I was coming along, I thought to myself that all this was a judgment on you for having let yourself be made a fool of by the West End countesses, and spending your money on such-like great ladies, who are no better than they should be, for it's no secret that the Earl of Curzon's

proctor is going to bring an action against you and Lord Sackville for crim. con."

"Enough of all that!" interrupted Emmerson, sharply. "If I have had my faults, you have had yours — I mean, in the shape of extravagances."

"Ah! but it is much worse," rejoined his wife, "to go gallivanting about with loose characters, by which means you bring your family into troubles and bothers of all kind."

"Enough, I say!" ejaculated Emmerson, flying into a passion. "And now leave me. I have letters to write. Come back in the evening, if you choose."

"Well, well, perhaps I may," answered his wife, and she soon afterward took her departure, little thinking in what a dreadful state of mind she left her husband, and not being likely to care very much even if she had really known it.

Again did Emmerson pace to and fro in that apartment, which under any circumstances would have been dull and gloomy to a degree, but which now seemed of a dulness and gloom beyond all possibility of description. Heavens! what tortures did that man's brain experience as thus, like a chafing lion in its cage, he turned and turned in that narrow space. Oh, and there is something dreadful, dreadful, in turning thus often and often, for it shows that the mind is filled with a restlessness that is in itself an excruciation.

He looked at his watch. It was now one o'clock. An hour passed; never, never had an hour dragged itself along with such leaden footsteps. Another hour wound its slow length along with a more wearying tardiness still, and yet no one came. Ah! was it a mere excuse of the creditor to get rid of the importunity of his debtor's wife? Emmerson began to fear so. But still he clung to hope. Good God! how could he do otherwise? For the pitch of desperation was passed, and because this very agony of agonies was transcended did it become necessary to fall back upon hope again to save the brain from bursting or from going mad.

It was past three o'clock, and the front door bell rang. There had been many rings during the last two hours, and on each occasion was Emmerson's suspense excited to the utmost degree. Now again, therefore, did he experience the same thrilling, throbbing, rending, excruciating agony,

for everything at present appeared to him a matter of life or death.

Footsteps ascended the stairs; then a key turned in the lock of his door. It was opened, and a visitor entered.

"Varian!" said Emmerson, his heart sinking within him as he encountered the look of his ex-clerk. Then staggering to his seat, he all in a moment felt the necessity of becoming civil, nay, even servile, cringing, and grovelling to that man whom he knew to be the arbiter of his destiny.

It was difficult to gather from Varian's look the mood in which he was toward his imprisoned master. The young man's countenance was fixed and almost passionless; it might have augured a relenting sorrow for Emmerson's fallen condition, or it might equally as well have betokened a cold implacability. All this the miserable captive saw at a glance, and he caught greedily at the ray of hope which pointed to the former. Yet it was hoping in desperation's despite, for deep and dark was the misgiving which at the same time struck to Emmerson's soul.

"I come, sir," said Varian, in a voice the accents of which were as dubious as his looks, leaving nothing of his humour or intent to be gathered from them, "I come, sir, from your detaining creditor, who, as I told you on the night of your arrest, left the matter entirely in my hand."

"Yes, yes, Mr. Varian, I know what you said, I recollect it full well," interrupted Emmerson, quivering with nervous excitement. "Well, and you have recommended him to be merciful? You — you — "

"Be pleased, sir, to listen to me," said Varian. "I have come to deliver myself of a message, and likewise to address you in a few words relative to some little matters concerning which I think you ought to be enlightened."

"Yes, but the message from the creditor, the message, the message?" repeated Emmerson, absolutely pitiable in his unmanned nervousness and the abject impatience of his suspense.

"Permit me to preface what I am about to say on the creditor's behalf with a few observations on my own account," and thus speaking, Theodore Varian seated himself in a chair with the cool deliberation of one who is not only resolved to perform a particular part, but also to take his own time in doing it.

Emmerson resigned himself to a prolonged interval of the cruellest suspense, but so desperate was his position, that he feared to anger the young man by any further demonstration of impatience.

"In the first place, Mr. Emmerson," resumed Theodore Varian, in that cold, measured voice and deliberate manner which was the same as heaping torture upon torture, agony upon agony, in respect to the miserable wretch who wished only to hear one word, yes or no, so that it might be decisive of his fate, and if of the very worst, at least put him out of suspense, "Mr. Emmerson," said Varian, "in the first place, I wish to enlighten you on a few of those proceedings which since my return into your service I have been conducting against you. It was I who threw in your way those newspapers that contained such flaming accounts of speculations and enterprises which I full well conjectured to be worthless, and in your greediness to augment your gains, as well as to counterbalance your extravagances, you nibbled at the bait. Next, when your vanity led you to stand as a candidate for the aldermanic gown of one of the City wards, I went among those who had promised you their support, and thus was it that although your canvass gave promise of complete success, the result of the poll proved the most mortifying, the most humiliating. At the moment you were vapouring and declaiming about 'our blessed Constitution,' 'our glorious laws,' and 'our admirable social system,' I was darkly and insidiously undermining you amongst all your civic friends. To me, then, did you owe your defeat, and secretly I gloried in your discomfiture. Then, about the same time, you began to observe that many of your most influential City friends began to look coldly upon you. It was I who secretly propagated rumours tending to destroy your character, and consequently to diminish your credit. I managed, though with some little difficulty, to scrape an acquaintance and form an intimacy with a clerk at your banker's — "

"Ah!" ejaculated Emmerson, with a sudden start, for his guilty conscience instantaneously suggested to him that Theodore had most probably become acquainted with the fact of the bill so near due.

"And from that clerk," continued Varian, without appearing to take the slightest notice of either Emmerson's

ejaculation or of his increased perturbation of manner, "from that clerk I learned the exact state of your account, and I told him enough to induce him to put his employers on their guard toward you. Ah! I knew full well at the time that the bankers wrote you a peremptory letter, desiring that your account should be placed on a more satisfactory footing, and I also knew that you applied to several capitalists for an advance of funds. There also was I secretly at work, and I took good care that the evil rumours I spread concerning your financial position should reach their ears. Hence the mortifying refusals which you received, one after the other, and which struck you blow upon blow, every one of which became duly known to me. Nor was I idle in other ways to do you a mischief. I sought excuses for calling upon those well-to-do tradesmen who occasionally did business with you, and I told them where they might obtain pecuniary accommodation on cheaper terms than at your office, so that even your very business rapidly fell off. Then, day by day, as I beheld the catastrophe coming, and ruin advancing upon you with giant strides, I paid frequent visits to the neighbourhood of Clapham, and circulated reports relative to your embarrassed condition. In the City, too, I stirred up all your tradesmen against you, and secretly advised your creditors to press for the prompt settlement of their claims. How well I succeeded in all these engines of destruction which I brought to bear upon you, you best know; and when at last the crisis came, — ay, and I knew full well when it did come, — I was not blind to the fact that you intended to collect together as much money as possible, wherewith to decamp from the country. But in order to lull you into temporary security, so that the final blow might fall all the more terribly, I did my best to get together as much money as I possibly could for you. Then did I observe the joy which you could scarcely conceal, and you thought yourself secure. I watched you, I dogged your movements. Having already come to a secret understanding with your principal creditor in respect to the course to be adopted, I sent to let him know that the time had come to act, and the sheriff's officer was speedily in attendance. You know the rest, and in your present position may you appreciate the folly, the utter folly, as well as the transcending iniquity, of all your former conduct toward me."

"Yes, yes, I have indeed been dreadfully punished, ay, and I am dreadfully punished now," exclaimed Emmerson. "But you have relented, you are satisfied with your vengeance —"

"Listen," interposed Varian, still in that cold, passionless style which left Emmerson in the suspense of such torturing doubt as to what the young man's ultimate intentions were, "I have a few more words to say, but only a very few. You have just learned from my lips how steadily, continuously, yet determinedly I have pursued my vengeance against you, but you have yet to learn that it was I who gave information to the Earl of Curzon relative to your intrigue with his wife. Yes, and that very amount of five thousand guineas which you despatched to the countess in the brown paper parcel fell into the earl's hand through my intervention. Ah! would you not like to have that money now? Would it not enable you to emancipate yourself from all your present difficulties?"

"But — but — do you not think," asked Emmerson, "is it not possible — in a word, do you — do you mean to prosecute this implacable feeling to the very last? Have you, then, no mercy?"

"Had you any mercy for me?" demanded Varian, his manner now undergoing a slightly perceptible change, and the light of a deeply concentrated hatred gleaming in his eyes.

"But did I not take you back again into my service?" asked Emmerson, trembling all over in the agony of suspense.

"Yes, but through no favour for me," replied Varian at once, with an increased bitterness of tone.

"At all events," said Emmerson, "you have had your revenge. By your own admission, you have ruined me."

"And did you not ruin me? Did you not plunge me into Newgate, and compel me to pass through the ordeal of shame and infamy?" cried Theodore, now rising from his seat, and fixing his looks with unmistakable hatred upon the wretched Emmerson. "What though I obtained a pardon? It was a mere release from the danger of punishment; it could not efface that branding-mark of infamy which you fixed upon me. Besides, did you not seek the ruin of my sister? Did you not endeavour to make me, her

brother, the pander to your infamous designs upon her? Mr. Emmerson, your guilt has been damning, your conduct toward me atrocious and infernal. Can you wonder, then, that I seek the deadliest vengeance? By Heaven! I were a coward, a traitor to the very name of man, did I tamely submit to all the wrongs I have received from you. Yes, I have accomplished your ruin, and I glory in it. And now let me tell you, in conclusion, that your detaining creditor will not take one shilling less than the whole amount, because I have privately assured him that, to my certain knowledge, he will get every farthing if he only holds out. In a word, I have persuaded him that you have thousands in your possession, but that your aim is to cheat your creditors, and to keep as much as you possibly can for yourself."

"But what you have said is false," cried Emmerson, now furious with intense hatred and rage.

"I know it," said Varian, coolly, "but you cannot persuade your creditor to think otherwise than what I have told him."

"We shall see," rejoined Emmerson, doggedly. "Now, then, our interview need last no longer."

"Ah! you think that you will be enabled to escape from the web wherein I have enmeshed you?" cried Varian, "but you are mistaken. In three days more that bill which you discounted at your banker's will fall due, and, when presented for payment, we shall see whether it is a forgery or not."

Gasping for breath, with hideous workings of his countenance, and with trembling limbs, the wretched Emmerson fell back annihilated in his seat, and as at that moment the dirty servant-girl came to lay the cloth for his dinner, Theodore Varian availed himself of the opportunity of the door being unlocked to quit the room. But ere he disappeared, he flung back one last look of the bitterest hate and direst malignity upon the wretched man whom his vengeance was thus consigning to eternal perdition.

Three days afterward the bill came due, and was pronounced to be a forgery. Criminal proceedings were forthwith adopted, and Mr. Emmerson, the once opulent money-broker and member of the Common Council, was transferred to Newgate.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HOPES AND INTRIGUES IN THE CONDEMNED CELL

TEN days afterward, the sessions commenced at the Old Bailey, and Emmerson was placed upon his trial. As the fallen man stood in the dock, he presented a piteous spectacle indeed to the view of those assembled. All vital colouring had left his countenance, which was hideous in its ghastliness, and the dread expression of which was heightened by the unnatural fever-light that burned in his wild, staring eyes. Most assuredly he did not then look like a man who was in much of a humour to hold forth on "our blessed Constitution," "our glorious laws," and "our admirable social system." On the contrary, he now found out to his cost that the Constitution, if any there be at all, was the very source whence flowed the barbarous, the atrocious, and the sanguinary laws which, in order to prop up the money interests of a vile social system, awarded the penalty of death to the man who committed a forgery.

Such was the sentence passed upon Emmerson now; and when, after a six hours' trial, during which his counsel had exercised all his eloquence and all his ingenuity to procure an acquittal, the prisoner was found guilty, and the judge from the bench pronounced his awful doom, then did the wretched man suddenly feel as if frenzy was seizing upon his brain, and he flung around him a look in which was expressed the direst anguish that the mortal heart could know.

But, ah! what eye encounters his own, and suddenly rivets his attention? Standing on a bench behind the thickest of the crowd thronging the court stood Theodore Varian. He had not appeared as a witness on the trial, because his evidence was not needed, the case being complete enough without his intervention, but he had been,

all the time, a spectator and a listener in the court, ay, and the most interested of all spectators and all listeners. He had marked every varying expression of Emmerson's countenance, every fluctuating emotion, whether of transitory hope or of utter desperation, that found expression there, and he had gloated over the poignant agonies of that wretched man. Now, too, in that crowning moment, when all the first tremendous influence of the death-dooming judgment had fastened upon the prisoner's soul, did Theodore Varian experience the consummation of his infernal joy on meeting the agonizing, despairing look so wildly flung forth from the dock.

The next moment a hand was laid upon Emmerson's shoulder. He started, he turned mechanically, and, with a wildering confusion in his brain, stepped out of the dock. It was one of the turnkeys of Newgate who had thus beckoned him away, but Emmerson recollected him not. He now seemed to be walking in a dream, a sort of intoxication in which ineffable horrors haunted him like shadowy phantoms whose reality was involved in misty doubt. There was a droning sound in his brain, and a ringing in his ears, his sight appeared to swim, and so strange was the feeling in all his limbs that he could not tell whether or not they were joined on to his body, and whether they moved by his own volition or mechanically of themselves.

In this horrible dreaminess he was led back into Newgate, and there, instead of being taken to the ward in which he had hitherto been in company with others, he was now consigned to a cell in another part of the prison. Chains were put upon him, chains that were fastened to his ankles and around his waist, and then he was left alone. Alone! — no, not alone; for in the thoughts and recollections that came gushing back into his brain, dispelling the clouds which had been hanging around, and bringing a horrible clearness with them, oh, in these fearful memories and anguished reflections there was a hideous companionship. For he was now in a condemned cell. He was a doomed man, and his days were numbered.

It may be necessary to remind our readers that up to the period of an accused person's condemnation he is looked upon as innocent, and can therefore dispose of his property according to his pleasure, but the instant a jury's verdict pro-

nounces him guilty of felony, whatever he possesses instantaneously belongs to the Crown. The day before his trial, Emmerson had entrusted all his money to his wife. In various ways, such as the expenses of the sponging-house, the cost of his defence, his family's maintenance, and so forth, he had expended about a hundred and fifty guineas, but he had still seventeen hundred guineas left, and it was exactly this sum which he had confided to Mrs. Emmerson. Into her hands did he give it because he had not on earth a friend whom he could trust, no, not one; and though he had sore misgivings when making up his mind thus to place his all in the possession of a frivolous, extravagant, thoughtless woman, who, moreover, had no real affection for him, yet was he compelled to do so. Necessity ruled him, and there was no alternative. At all events, he saw that it was better to incur whatever risk there might be in letting his wife become the guardian of his treasure than to keep it about his person, only to be taken possession of by the sheriff in the name of the Crown.

When seated in his condemned cell, after the trial, alone, and with the chains upon him, and when, too, his mind began to be filled with that horrible clearness which was now so frightfully dispelling all doubts as to the awful reality of his position, his ideas settled upon that amount of seventeen hundred guineas which he had deposited in his wife's hands. But why did the wretched man suffer his thoughts thus to revert to his gold? Was not every tie that had through life bound him to the attractions of lucre now severed by the doom which left him for death? No, no, ten thousand times no! While there was life there was hope, and Emmerson, still catching at straws in his drowning agonies, buoyed himself up with the hope that his gold might serve as a means to accomplish his escape. It was a large sum, and were not turnkeys bribable? To be sure, and suppose that he began by offering five hundred guineas? If this amount would suffice to purchase his safety, he should yet have twelve hundred left wherewith to begin the world anew in another clime. But even supposing that he had to pay a thousand guineas as the bribe for his escape, still there would be seven hundred left for himself, and how much could be done with such an amount! Or even if he had to give every guinea in order to bribe the greedy turnkeys, would it not

be better to go forth a beggar, ay, even the veriest beggar upon the face of the earth, so long as he should be enabled to save this life from that fearful engine of death, the gibbet?

In such a strain as this did the wretched man reason to himself throughout the remainder of the dreadful day of his trial. As a matter of course, objection after objection suggested itself to the plan which he had in view, but with that readiness of ingenuity which desperation itself engenders, he disposed of every obstacle which seemed to menace the successful carrying out of his project. Thus did he beguile his imagination into a dream of hope which was not only solacing, but which also became full of confidence, and he lay down to rest in a mood far less miserable than thousands out-of-doors, when thinking of the man who had that day been sentenced to death, could possibly imagine him to be.

On the following morning, when the turnkey visited the cell, Emmerson thought it prudent not to delay broaching the subject that was uppermost in his mind. He accordingly made some pleasant remark by way of opening a conversation, but when he received a short and almost brutal answer, and then observed that the turnkey's countenance was very far from wearing an encouraging expression, his heart suddenly sank within him, and the words he would have uttered initiatory of the cherished plan died upon his lips.

"Now, then, sir, if you choose to be shaved," said the turnkey, "the barber is going his round, and he shall come to you."

Emmerson was about to answer in the negative; for why should he, a doomed man, and with spirits so suddenly damped into utter hopelessness, trouble himself any more in this life about his personal appearance? But just at the very instant that this negative response was about to fall from his tongue, it suddenly struck him that perhaps the barber might appear more complaisant and wear a more hopeful countenance than the turnkey. He accordingly said, "Yes," and in a few minutes the barber was introduced.

When Emmerson found himself alone with this individual, in the condemned cell where they were left together by the turnkey, he surveyed him not merely with attention, but with an earnest scrutiny. He saw, then, before him a man of about six or seven and twenty, thin, pale, and with the

marks of dissipation on his features. There was also a certain sinister expression on that countenance, which seemed actually encouraging to the purpose Emmerson had in view. As for the barber himself, he of course saw that he was the object of this survey, but did not appear to take any special notice of it, doubtless fancying that it might arise from the morbid mood or disturbed humour of a wretched being condemned to death.

"So you are the prison barber?" said Emmerson, with his eyes still riveted on the man.

"I am, sir, just for the present," was the reply, "the regular one being ill."

"Ah! then you are not the regular one?" said Emmerson, inquiringly. "How long have you acted in this capacity within these walls?"

"About six weeks," was the man's answer, as he prepared his shaving-tackle.

"And are you likely to continue visiting the prison much longer?"

"Well, I should say I am, sir, for the regular barber don't seem to be getting well."

"In that case, then, you must come and shave me," said Emmerson, "every morning until —"

And he stopped suddenly short, as a man pauses in horror upon the brink of a precipice which he suddenly reaches.

"I shall be very happy, sir," was the barber's observation, "and I am sure I am very sorry to see a gentleman of your standing in such —"

"Enough," said Emmerson, not sternly, but convulsively with horror. "What is your name?" he demanded, quickly.

"Richard Melmoth — Dick, they call me, sir. But I ain't a master barber on my own account. I live with Mr. Coffin, who —"

And then he also stopped short in sudden confusion, for he instantaneously perceived that he had just mentioned a name which might be already too well known to the doomed man.

"Coffin!" echoed the latter, with another strong shudder convulsing him from head to foot as he sat in his chair, so that the very chains clanked upon his legs with the powerful writhing of his limbs. "Is not he the — the — you know what I mean?"

"Well, he is, sir," responded Dick Melmoth, "but I am sure I beg pardon for having hinted at anything unpleasant."

"No matter, no matter, my good fellow," said Emmerson, with the quickness of nervous excitement. "Your master, Coffin — you said he was your master, I think?"

"Yes, sir, Dan'el Coffin is my master, and a tidy sort of a person he is, notwithstanding his name isn't a very good one."

"Ah! no matter the name," interrupted Emmerson, catching greedily at what he saw encouraging in Dick Melmoth's remark. "You say that your master, Daniel Coffin, is a good kind of a man? Well, and if I mistake not, you also are a good kind of a person. You would rather do a fellow creature a service than an injury? Yes, yes, I know you would — I read it in your countenance. Especially," added Emmerson, his voice sinking to a low whisper and his look assuming an expression of deep and excited meaning, "if you were to be well paid for any such service rendered?"

Dick Melmoth now regarded the doomed man with mingled astonishment and mistrust, for it struck him that the awful sense of his position might have touched his brain. But perceiving nought indicative of mental alienation in his look, Melmoth assumed a cunning air, and whispered, "There's nothing that Dan'el Coffin would not do for money."

"Tell him, then, tell him," said Emmerson, with feverish eagerness, "that I will give him five hundred guineas, yes, five hundred good golden guineas if he will assist me to escape from this dreadful place."

"Ah! have you really that hope, then?" said Dick Melmoth.

"Hope! Yes, to be sure I have hope," returned Emmerson, sharply. "It is impossible I can die so soon. No, no, it is impossible. Consider, five hundred guineas, and if that is not enough — But it is a large sum, a very large sum, and a great deal can be done with it. Tell Mr. Coffin all that I say."

"Well, sir, I will, and to-morrow morning when I come in I will let you know what his answer is. But you had better let me shave you now as soon as possible, for the turnkey will be coming back in a minute to let me out of the

cell, and he will think it odd if I have not even begun to put the brush to your face."

Emmerson accordingly submitted himself to the process of shaving, and by the time it was over, the turnkey made his appearance to let the barber out.

As hour after hour now passed away, Emmerson continued to yield himself up to the wildest hopes, and yet his exterior was composed and tranquil as he sat in the solitude of his cell giving way to these sanguine visions. He resembled the teriaki, or Oriental opium-eater, who without moving from his seat, and with an unruffled and unvarying equanimity of countenance, launches himself on the sunny ocean of his excited imaginings, visits in fancy the most delicious climates of the world, revels in every joy, partakes in every pleasure, and not merely forgets every source of earthly uneasiness, but conjures up ten thousand causes of Elysian bliss.

In a similarly dreamy state did Emmerson while away the time. His character seemed to be altogether changed by his misfortunes. Once eminently practical in all his pursuits, he was now a mere visionary; but then, it was so necessary now to cheat the mind of its sources of terror, lull the soul into confidence, and conjure up the delusions of hope to displace the dark realities of despair.

The chaplain visited the cell, and then Emmerson, awakening from his dream, listened attentively to all that the reverend gentleman had to say. For Emmerson had always been a hypocrite with regard to religion, and it suited him to be more so now, so that he might appear to have renounced every thought for this life and thus lull asleep all suspicion respecting his hope of escape. The chaplain passed an hour with him, and then withdrew in the belief that the condemned man was very penitent and in a most admirable state of mind, considering all things. Therefore, in consequence of the reverend gentleman's report, it was deemed totally unnecessary to place anybody in the condemned cell to keep watch upon Emmerson. Indeed, such was not the custom at the time of which we are writing, save in those cases where there was positive ground for apprehending an attempt at suicide.

The day was slipping away, and Emmerson began to wonder that his wife and daughter had not been to see him.

Previous to the trial he had enjoined them not to be in the court, and the result was borne to them by the attorney who had conducted his defence. That they had not visited him during the first few hours which succeeded the terrible sentence was not surprising, for little as was the affection subsisting between the husband and wife, yet, at all events, the feelings of the daughter toward the father were a little more tender, and it might be well supposed that Miss Emmerson was fearfully shocked at her sire's awful position. But why, after having had the benefit of an entire night to compose their minds somewhat, his wife and daughter should not visit him during the day that was now passing, he could not conjecture. He began to be alarmed lest they meant to leave him unsolaced to meet his doom, while they squandered away the money entrusted to their keeping. But while he was beginning to give way to these apprehensions, the door of the cell was opened, and two ladies, dressed in deep mourning of a very handsome description, were ushered in. Their veils were down, and for a moment Emmerson was in doubt whether his suspicion as to who they were was correct or not. But all doubt was speedily dissipated when they raised their veils and threw themselves into his arms, sobbing and crying in a manner which was afterward represented in the newspapers as " most agonizing."

But the moment the turnkey had withdrawn, Emmerson disengaged himself from the embrace of his wife and daughter, and, glancing sternly from one to the other, he said, " What is the meaning of this? "

" Oh, my dear, dear husband," sobbed Mrs. Emmerson, " how can you ask us such a question? Arabella and me would have been here earlier to-day, but we could not get our mourning sent home before. I gave orders for it the instant I heard the dreadful news yesterday, and the milliner sat up all night to make it. We thought it was but decent and proper to wait till it was ready before we came to see you."

" Nonsense, ridiculous! " ejaculated Emmerson, actually forgetting for the moment all the horrors of his position in the rage that he felt at the conduct of his wife and daughter in thus visiting him in the pomp of new mourning. " Do you know that this proceeding on your part has been dicta-

ted by a heartless vanity, and not by a genuine grief? Ah! there is gaiety even in your very mourning, there is finery in these weeds which you have assumed. You treat me as if I were already dead — "

Here Arabella threw herself with no affected outburst of grief into her father's arms, and besought him to pardon her if she had in any way done wrong, but, amidst rending sobs, she gaspingly declared that whatever she had done was at her mother's suggestion.

" Well, we will say no more about it," said Emmerson, disengaging himself from his daughter's embrace, for he was a man who disliked all huggings and kissings from those who were nearest and ought to have been dearest to him. " You have got that money safe? " he asked, turning abruptly toward his wife.

" Yes, to be sure, all except what we have laid out," and she glanced down at her mourning garb and then at that of her daughter.

" Now, understand me," said Emmerson, speaking in a low but decisive tone and with a look profoundly serious. " All hope has not abandoned me; indeed, I am confident of being enabled to escape. Now don't be foolish, Arabella, we shall be overheard," he said, suddenly turning toward his daughter, who gave vent to a paroxysm of unfeigned joy at the tidings which had just met her ears. " But all depends," he continued, again speaking to his wife, " upon your keeping that money safe until the moment it is wanted to pay those who will assist in my escape."

" Depend upon it," answered Mrs. Emmerson, " that it is as safe with me as if in the Bank of England."

We need not dwell any longer upon this interview, which lasted but little more than half an hour, for so soon as Emmerson had assured himself that the money was really safe in his wife's keeping, he rather wished that she and Arabella would take their departure, so that he might once more give way to that opiate lull in which he had during the early part of the day steeped his senses.

On the following morning Emmerson awaited Dick Melmoth's arrival with the most acute suspense. In due course the turnkey made his appearance to inquire if Emmerson would have the barber, and with such greedy haste did the condemned man reply in the affirmative, that the prison

functionary, evidently struck by his manner, could not help eying him suspiciously for a moment.

"Ah! it is such a relief," immediately exclaimed Emmerson, recovering his presence of mind, "to have some one to talk to, if only for a few minutes."

This remark at once satisfied the turnkey, who perhaps would even have been satisfied without it, for he had been long enough employed within those prison walls to know that condemned men were but too likely to say and do strange things.

Once more alone with Dick Melmoth, Emmerson immediately saw by his manner that the proposal had been entertained, and his heart dilated within him.

"Well, what does your master say? Has he agreed? Will he accept?"

"He will do it," answered Dick Melmoth, "but not under a thousand."

"A thousand!" ejaculated Emmerson. "That is enormous."

"Ay, and Coffin says that it is a precious risk to run," replied Dick. "Remember it's no joke to help a man out of such a hobble as this, and if so be he was caught — "

"But he will undertake it?" asked Emmerson, nervously.

"He will," rejoined Dick Melmoth. "But what earnest can you give him that the money will be forthcoming when the work is done?"

"I have the money — "

"You! — here?" ejaculated Melmoth. "Why, if the sheriff knew it, he would take every farthing away from you in a jiffy."

"I do not mean here," returned Emmerson. "My wife has got the money — or can get it. A friend will let her have it when the time comes — "

"Ah! but suppose he shouldn't?" said Melmoth.

"But I know that he will," returned Emmerson, positively.

"But Mr. Coffin don't know it, you see, and he won't move a peg till he sees that there's no mistake about the blunt."

"Well, then," said Emmerson, perceiving that it was necessary to be explicit, "my wife has got the money already,

and if you like, your master, Mr. Coffin, can go and see it at her lodgings."

"Well and good," observed Dick Melmoth. "This looks like business. Where is the lady's lodging?"

"In Fetter Lane," and Emmerson named the number of the house where his wife and daughter were dwelling. "They will visit me in the course of the day. I will tell them that a person may probably call upon them this evening in order to see that they really possess the sum we have named. Will that arrangement do?"

"Yes, perfectly," replied Melmoth. "Mr. Coffin has left the business to me to manage, because he himself can't very well come and see you on account of its not being usual for him to visit persons in your situation."

"I understand you," said Emmerson, with a ghastly look, for he knew that the allusion was meant to Coffin in his capacity of public executioner. "But the plan of my escape, the means, the arrangements —"

"I will tell you more to-morrow morning," interrupted Dick Melmoth. "We must not converse too long now."

He then proceeded to exercise his tonsorial functions upon Mr. Emmerson, and by the time he had done, the turnkey came back to give him egress from the cell. Emmerson was now once more alone, and he proceeded to reflect upon all that had just taken place. But his reverie was presently interrupted by the entrance of the chaplain, and again did the condemned man conduct himself in a way which induced the reverend gentleman to think most favourably of his state of mind.

Soon after midday Mrs. and Miss Emmerson again made their appearance, and Emmerson, after explaining to them the nature of the visit they were to expect in the evening, addressed his wife in the ensuing terms:

"Now, remember, you will show the person that calls, whoever he may be, one thousand guineas and no more. If he asks whether you possess more, you will give an emphatic reply in the negative. And be careful that he sees the money only, and touches it not, for I am dealing with unscrupulous characters, — necessarily so in the position wherein I am placed. I need not tell you that it is my life which has to be saved, my life which to a certain extent will be in your hands on this occasion."

Mrs. Emmerson promised faithful compliance with her husband's instructions, and Arabella was so much affected she went into hysterics. Mr. Emmerson hated "a scene," especially as he wished to avoid everything tending to dispirit himself, and he therefore was well pleased when his wife and daughter took their departure. He then remained once more alone to pursue his reflections and abandon himself to that condition of dreamy hopefulness which, as we before stated, had the effect of an opiate to lull him into tranquillity and security.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PRETENDED FRIEND

Theodore Varian had not in the meantime experienced any diminution of that fearful interest which he felt in the fate of his victim, an interest of no compassionating kind, but the aim of which was to ensure the dread catastrophe beyond the intervention of anything to prevent it. He had therefore, on the preceding day and on that of which we are now writing, lurked about the exterior of Newgate, watching whether any of Emmerson's former friends came to visit the prison, for it struck him that the unhappy man might endeavour to obtain the interest of some toward procuring a pardon. Having been a prisoner there himself, Theodore was acquainted with the turnkeys, and by means of a little bribery and a little treating at the adjacent public-house, he ascertained the seeming condition of the man's mind. That is to say, he was told that Emmerson bore himself tranquilly and with apparent resignation, and that no persons from out-of-doors save his wife and daughter had been admitted to see him.

Theodore Varian knew all the ins and outs of Emmerson's character so well as to be fully aware that anything like resignation on his part could be merely a hypocritical assumption, and he therefore came to the conclusion that the doomed man had yet some hope on which he relied, or some project which he was working out. But Varian was determined that hope and project alike should fail, whatever they might be, for in the implacability of his vengeance he resolved to hunt his mortal enemy to the scaffold, and only rest when he beheld him hanging lifeless there.

While pondering upon the position of affairs, it struck Theodore that he would call upon the barber who usually

attended in the prison, ascertain if he had performed his functions upon Emmerson, and if so, whether he also believed him to be in a resigned and tranquil condition. But on proceeding to the barber's house in the Old Bailey, Theodore learned that the object of his inquiry had been ill for some time, and that he had temporarily delegated his monopoly of beards within Newgate walls to one Richard Melmoth belonging to another barber's shop, in Fleet Lane. Thither did Varian accordingly repair, and on observing the name of Coffin over the door, he at once knew that this was the abode of the public executioner.

It was in the afternoon when Theodore entered the Hangman's shop, and, taking off his hat, he bade the young man who was in attendance proceed to cut his hair. This was none other than Dick Melmoth himself, who, placing a chair for his customer, commenced the operation forthwith.

"So they have found the City bill-broker guilty of the forgery," said Varian, as if in a casual manner.

"Yes," answered Dick Melmoth. "I saw him this morning."

"Did you, indeed?" cried Theodore, suddenly showing an interest in the topic of conversation.

"To be sure, and yesterday morning also," replied Melmoth. "The fact is, I attend in there to shave the prisoners, the regular barber being ill."

"And how does Emmerson bear himself?" asked Theodore.

"Well, pretty comfortably, all things considering," answered Melmoth.

"Do you mean to say that he has any hope of a reprieve?"

"Lor' bless you, sir, everybody has a hope till the last, and I don't think Mr. Emmerson is different from the rest."

There was now a brief pause, during which Theodore Varian reflected profoundly.

"Is he communicative at all with you?" he at length asked.

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded Dick Melmoth.

"I mean," returned Theodore, looking up in a significant manner toward Melmoth's countenance, "that if you would do something for me, I will pay you handsomely."

"Well, that's English, at all events," said Melmoth. "But

what do you want me to do, and what do you mean by handsome payment?"

"Can we have a little conversation together without fear of interruption?" asked Theodore. "This shop is very public, and we may be overheard."

"Well, then," said a growling, savage kind of voice, "step in here, and we will talk the matter over."

Theodore started, even to the risk of having the scissors thrust into his eyes, as that voice, coming from behind, struck his ear, and on looking around, he beheld a most repulsive individual, standing on the threshold of the door opening into the little parlour behind the shop, for the Hangman had been attentively listening all the while to the preceding colloquy between Dick Melmoth and the customer.

Accordingly, a finishing stroke being given to the hair-clipping operation, Theodore passed into the back room, where the Hangman bade him sit down, saying, "I see you have a little business in hand, and we will talk it over quietly. I suppose you know who I am, and if not, I'll act as my own master of the ceremonies and introduce myself as Mr. Dan'el Coffin. This chap here is my assistant," he added, pointing to Melmoth, "and so we can talk before him. Come, shut the door, Dick, and sit down along with us."

"You doubtless overheard what I was saying to your assistant," observed Varian, conquering the mingled repugnance and terror which he for a moment felt on finding himself in the company of that dreadful man, who, as he had learned from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, was a principal actor in the memorable scenes at the hut near Shooter's Hill.

"To be sure," exclaimed the Hangman. "The moment I heard you beginning to talk serious to Dick Melmoth here, I began to listen very attentive indeed. It's my way, because I never let a chance escape."

"Well, well, Mr. Coffin," said Theodore, "we have come together, and need not discuss how it has been brought about. The fact is, I am a very dear and intimate friend of Mr. Emmerson —"

"Ah! then you came to my shop just now with an intention," interrupted the Hangman, "and not in a promiscuous manner?"

"No, not in an accidental manner," rejoined Varian. "I learned from the regular prison barber that you, or, rather, your man here, had got the custom of the place, and so I came to see you. The fact is, as I have just now said, I am an intimate friend of Emmerson's, but I dare not openly display the deep interest I feel in him. You will excuse me for declining to enter into particulars? Suffice it to say that whatever I do in this matter is entirely of a private nature. I must not be seen in it, I must not be known in it. Emmerson himself must not even be suffered to learn that any effort at all is being made in his behalf — at least, not until its result be known, for it were useless to buoy him up with hope unless it is certain to be fulfilled."

"Well, then, what do you propose, and how can we help you in any way?" demanded the Hangman, who did not exactly see what Theodore was driving at, or appeared to be driving at.

"Your assistant here, Mr. Coffin, has access to Mr. Emmerson," continued Theodore. "Could he not glean from the unhappy man whether, if the means of escape were put within his reach, he would avail himself of them?"

"Yes, this can be done fast enough," said the Hangman, exchanging a rapid glance of significancy with Dick Melmoth, but not so rapid as to escape Theodore's observation. "Well, then, suppose what you have suggested is done, what next?"

"Having first ascertained whether Emmerson would avail himself of the means of escape if placed within his power," continued Theodore, "it would follow, as a matter of course, to see whether such means could by any possibility be afforded."

"Well, and you would enter into it all, and you would pay for it?" asked the Hangman, with another quick glance toward Dick Melmoth.

"If I were not prepared to do so, I should not be here this moment," said Theodore. "As for my readiness to be the secret mover in any stratagem that may ensure my unfortunate friend's escape from an ignominious death, I have sought you out for the purpose, and as for my means of remunerating you, behold!" and with these words Theodore displayed a number of bank-notes, which he took from a pocketbook, and for the possession of which he was indebted

to the bounty of his kind benefactor, Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"Come, all this is businesslike enough," said the Hangman. "But you say you don't wish to appear in the matter?"

"No; my avocations, my station in life, my connections, everything, prevent me from taking any overt part in this proceeding. Indeed, I would not have it mentioned until the very last to Emmerson himself that I am engaged in whatsoever plan may be set on foot for his deliverance. I shall not even tell you my name, or who I am, nor aught concerning me; and if any undue curiosity be manifested with a view to discover who I am, I shall at once abandon the affair and have nothing more to do with it."

Wary, cunning, and astute as the reader knows the Hangman to be, he was gradually thrown off his guard by this language so specious, so plausible. Indeed, it appeared natural enough that an influential person, of good standing in society, should keep himself completely in the background while setting afoot a project of the kind hinted at, and that Varian was a young gentleman of the utmost respectability, both the Hangman and Dick Melmoth readily believed from his personal appearance. Moreover, the sight of the banknotes had produced a marvellous effect upon Mr. Coffin's credulity, touching his weakest point and working on his most delicate susceptibility. He accordingly resolved, after exchanging another significant look with Dick Melmoth, to give the present business a shape and substantiality at once by confiding to Theodore everything that was already in contemplation.

"Well, sir, I see that you are one of the right sort," he accordingly began, "and so we can soon come to an understanding with each other. In the first place, you want to know whether your unfortunate friend, Mr. Emmerson, would avail himself of the means of escape if they were placed in his way? This is what you want to know, and I can give you the information at once, without making you wait a single hour, much less a whole day, to acquire it. As for what the information is worth, I must leave that to your generosity."

"Fifty guineas by way of a commencement," said Theodore, inwardly rejoicing at the success of the tact he had

displayed in thus drawing out the Hangman, for he saw that he was about to learn something of real importance.

"Thank'ee, sir," said Daniel Coffin, as he took up the bank-notes which Theodore flung across the table. "Now, then, I can tell you," he proceeded, with a knowing look upon his hangdog countenance, "that not only is Mr. Emmerson ready to avail himself of any means of escape which may be presented to him, but he and my man Dick Melmoth here have already had a little talk on the subject."

"Ah! this is indeed good news," exclaimed Theodore, with a well-assumed look of the most genuine joy. "Poor Emmerson! he has been a dear and valued friend to me, and I would make many, many sacrifices to save him from so dreadful a death. Tell me, tell me, my good friends," he continued, with every appearance of the most heartfelt feeling, "whether there be really a chance, a hope, even the slightest prospect, of accomplishing his rescue?"

"Where there's a will there's a way," answered Coffin, "and although the walls of Newgate are very thick and very high, the bars very massive, the watch very vigilant, and the chains on one's legs uncommon awkward, yet all these obstacles may be got over when Dan'el Coffin chooses to set his wits to work."

"Ah! now you encourage the most sanguine hope within me," cried Theodore, seizing the Hangman's hand and pressing it with an appearance of the most genuine fervour. "Tell me what your plans are, explain to me what is already done, and whatever reward has been already promised you, I will double it. Yes," added Theodore, with strong emphasis, "I will double it, no matter how large the amount."

The Hangman threw upon Dick Melmoth a look of gloating satisfaction at this magnificent promise, and reverting his eyes toward Varian, he said, "You are very liberal, sir, very generous indeed, but take care you don't talk rather too fast when you speak about doubling the reward."

"I tell you that what I said was deliberately uttered," rejoined Theodore, "and was no vain, idle boast. Come, tell me at once what is the amount of the reward promised you?"

"A thousand guineas," returned the Hangman, intently

watching Varian's countenance, so as to ascertain the nature of the impression made by this announcement.

"A thousand guineas! It is a large sum," said Theodore, slowly, and apparently in a musing mood, "but still I shall not fly from my word. How and when is this money to be paid? For I may as well fulfil my promise at the same time."

"Well, you are indeed an out-and-out friend to Mr. Emmerson," observed the Hangman, thinking it necessary to flatter his generous visitor with a compliment. "To tell you the truth, then, Mrs. Emmerson is going to convince us to-night that the money is ready. She has got it, or will have it, at her lodgings, so I shall just toddle down to Fetter Lane between nine and ten to-night to convince myself that the cash is there, and if you like, sir, to make an appointment with me at about the same time, anywhere you choose, you might take the opportunity of proving that your money will be forthcoming also. Besides, as I mean to ask Mrs. Emmerson for a few hundreds on account, perhaps you would not mind — "

"Certainly not. I understand you well," exclaimed Varian, with so much apparent frankness and cordial willingness of manner that never in all his life had Daniel Coffin been so completely thrown off his guard. "I will call upon you here at ten o'clock to-night, and bring you a few hundreds on account. But observe, not a single syllable to any one," he added, rising from his seat as he spoke.

"Mum's the word, sir," rejoined Daniel Coffin. "I always keep secrets as close as wax."

Theodore Varian then took his departure, leaving the Hangman and Dick Melmoth to chuckle over the lucrative job they appeared to have in hand, and congratulate themselves on the prospect of clearing a couple of thousand guineas in a very short space of time.

The reader could not have experienced any difficulty in penetrating Varian's object throughout the preceding interview with Coffin and his assistant. From the moment that the conversation in the shop first took a turn that promised to become interesting and confidential, Varian's aim was to ascertain whether Emmerson was buoyed up with any particular hope, and if so, what its nature might be. By pretending to be the doomed man's friend, it not only

seemed natural enough that he should be taking an interest in his predicament, but it likewise was the best method of inviting any confidential communication. In all this, then, had Theodore fully succeeded, and it now only remained for him to frustrate the plan and annihilate the hope.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE RESULT

An almost sleepless night did Emmerson pass, for he was now tortured with a thousand anxieties relative to the success of the schemes that were in progress for his deliverance from the scaffold. Though hope was certainly uppermost in his mind, yet he could not any longer lull himself into that dreaminess which had heretofore soothed him for so many hours at a time. No, for his imagination suggested many, many sources of alarm and uneasiness that agitated in his mind, along with the hope which, though maintaining the ascendency, was not powerful enough to extinguish every militating feeling altogether. What if any accident should happen to the money? Everything depended upon the safety of that gold which was to prove the key of his deliverance.

He wished that he had asked his wife where she kept it, whether in a cupboard or in a trunk, and whether she carried the key in her pocket when she went out. Then he feared lest Daniel Coffin should strive to possess himself of the money without the intention of doing his work for it. Next he asked himself, over and over again, how the escape was to be effected, supposing that all was right with the money, and that Coffin proved faithful to his agreement. For when Emmerson thought of the tremendous massive walls, which enclosed him, as it were, in a living tomb, the other walls equally impregnable that lay between his own cell and the open street, the enormous bars that grated the windows, the numbers of persons always about during the day in every part of the prison, and the careful watch which he knew full well was kept by night, — when, we say, he thought of all these things, he beheld so many insuperable barriers

between himself and freedom that he almost grew wild with horror and affright. But the next moment the whisperings of hope would remind him that men had escaped from Newgate on various occasions, and however desperate and daring their exploits might have been, he was prepared to act as desperately and daringly in his own behalf. Besides, who could tell what schemes Daniel Coffin might suggest, what opportunities he might find for smoothing down difficulties, and what bold conception he might initiate so as to lead to the fullest success?

Such is a brief outline of the conflicting thoughts which agitated in Emmerson's brain throughout the greater portion of the night, and made him toss and heave and roll and writhe and convulse, and clasp his hands, and press them to his throbbing brows, in fact, that whirled him through every possible phase of the heart's most potent feelings as he lay on the hard pallet in his gloomy cell. For a few brief intervals an uneasy slumber crept upon him, but on each occasion he woke up with a sudden start, pursued even into wakefulness by some horrible phantom that had haunted his temporary sleep. Or he would perhaps find himself sitting up in the bed, trembling all over with a strong agony, bathed in a profuse perspiration, cold and clammy as that of death, with the feeling, too, that his hair was standing right out, as it were, from his head. In this manner, between conflicting thoughts and brief intervals of fevered slumber, did Emmerson pass the livelong night.

Although it was now the beginning of the month of June, yet dull and misty broke the morning into the condemned cell, penetrating thither, indeed, with a hesitating, struggling uncertainty, much later than it had dawned upon the world without, for the windows of the cell were small, darkened with the massive bars, and not looking into one of the yards, but upon an obscure corridor, into which the light had to struggle first ere it penetrated more feebly still into the dungeon. The weather was exceedingly cold, too, for the time of year, and Emmerson shivered from head to foot as he rose from the pallet. His teeth chattered, he was nervous and uneasy, and he felt that if the slightest circumstance should occur to damp his only hope, his courage, such as it was in its unnatural bracing-up, would give way altogether.

It wanted an hour to the usual time of Dick Melmoth's arrival. An hour — oh, what a long, weary interval of excruciating suspense! If the idler, the debauchee, and the dissipated only knew what a world of feeling may be summed up in a single hour, how much of torturing agony may be condensed into that space, they would learn the importance of time and the value of each of those many, many hours which they waste in worthless, bad, or frivolous pursuits.

At length the well-known tread of the turnkey, accompanied by the clanking sound of the keys along the stone corridor, reached Emmerson's ears. It would be impossible to describe the feeling which now seized upon him, a feeling in which all the most powerful sentiments were strangely, wildly, and terribly blended, — burning hope and chilling dread, a devouring anxiety to receive the first look or word from Melmoth that should relieve him from suspense, and a fearful clinging even to this very suspense, lest certainty itself should become the horror of despair.

The key grated in the lock, the huge bolts were drawn back, and the stout, burly form of the prison functionary appeared on the threshold.

"Will you have the barber this morning, sir?" asked the man.

"Yes, yes, to be sure," was the response given with a nervousness that was rather felt than shown.

"Now, then, Dick," cried the turnkey, and Melmoth advanced along the passage.

The next moment he passed into the cell, and as the door closed behind him, he gave a slight but ominous shake of the head, in mute answer to the devouring, agonizing, beseeching regard which Emmerson fixed upon him.

As if a thunderbolt had stricken the wretched man, he fell back, and tumbled with the helpless weight of a corpse upon the bed which was immediately behind him. Dick Melmoth was frightened, and hastened to raise him, but for an instant did the young man recoil in horror, for never, never in his life had he beheld a countenance so ghastly, so perfectly hideous in its strong expression of awful feeling, as that which now looked up into his own. No, nor did Melmoth believe it possible that the human visage could in a moment become so distorted, so convulsed with horrible workings, or that it could be made so fearfully faithful an

index of the direst tortures that ever harrowed the human heart.

Slowly raising himself to a sitting posture on the side of the bed, Emmerson gazed up at Melmoth and endeavoured to frame some question that rose to his lips, but his tongue refused to give utterance to the words he sought to speak, and he sat vainly gasping, a piteous, wretched, miserable spectacle of abject humanity, with a crushed and broken spirit.

"It's all dicky with money and everything else, unless something should turn out to be better than we suspect," began Melmoth, not giving himself much trouble to break the intelligence in a delicate way.

"What — what do you mean?" asked Emmerson, just able to gasp forth these words.

"Why, I mean that the sheriff sent yesterday afternoon to your wife's lodgings and took all the money," answered Dick. "Sixteen or seventeen hundred guineas, I think I heard it was."

"O God! O God!" groaned Emmerson, in the bitterness of despair, and bowing his head upon his hands while his elbows rested on his knees, he became convulsed with grief.

But all of a sudden it struck him that the interview with the barber must necessarily be short, and that he should at least make the best of it, so as to ascertain his exact position. Recovering therefore some degree of composure, he bade Melmoth tell him everything that had taken place.

"Well, you see, sir," returned Dick, "last night, at a little after nine o'clock, me and Mr. Coffin toddled down to Fetter Lane, and on arriving at the house, were shown up to your lady's apartment. But, lo and behold! there was Mrs. Emmerson and your daughter a-sitting one on one side of the room and one on t'other, both rocking themselves to and fro, and moaning, and crying, and going on at such a rate that me and Mr. Coffin was quite taken aback. We stated our business, and then your good lady told us how the sheriff's officers had been and made a search in consequence of some secret information they had got, and how they took away every farthing except fifty guineas, which, by the sheriff's order, was left for the use of the ladies. So, finding that there was no money forthcoming, and not being a lady's man at all, — I mean, in offering sympathy

and all that kind of thing, — Mr. Coffin took himself home again, I of course going with him."

"But good Heaven!" cried Emmerson, in the wildness of his despair, "who could have given the information? Surely, surely, my mortal enemy, he who has hunted me to the very death, is not persecuting me still?"

"You don't happen to know whether it's likely that any friend is interesting himself in your behalf?" inquired Dick Melmoth.

"Friend!" repeated Emmerson, with almost maniac bitterness, "friend! Good heavens! do I look like a man who possesses a friend?"

"Well, then, I had better put the question point-blank," said Melmoth. "Do you know a young gentleman, about five and twenty, I should say, tall, nice-looking, slender, very neatly dressed, linen beautifully clean, fine eyes, too, I noticed, and a very good set of teeth — "

"Why, you are describing my mortal enemy, Theodore Varian," almost shrieked forth Emmerson, springing from the bed with a suddenness that made his fetters clank loudly and even hurt his limbs by the motion.

"Ah! then it was a damnable treachery, after all," exclaimed Dick Melmoth, "and Coffin more than suspected it when we found he did not come last night, according to his appointment."

"What on earth do you mean? To what are you alluding?" demanded the wretched man, in the cruelest suspense. "Tell me what has occurred."

"Why, yesterday, in the middle of the day, this young gentleman comes in such a cajoling fashion, gets me into conversation, then gets the upper hand of Dan'el himself, professes so much friendship for you, promises so many liberal things, and, in short, worms himself so completely into our confidence, that Mr. Coffin tells him everything, even to the fact of the money being at your good lady's lodgings —"

"Oh, accursed idiots that you were!" and the words hissed reptile-like between Emmerson's teeth, while his eyes glared with frenzied malignity upon Dick Melmoth, who recoiled from him in horror. "You have ruined me. You have sealed my doom, you and your accursed master. Oh, it is clear as daylight now, — too clear, too clear! Theodore Varian

pursues me still. He is determined to hunt me to the gallows. It is he who gave the information to the sheriff — my God! my God!"

And again the wretched man fell backward upon the hard pallet, with his hands pressed violently against his throbbing brows. There he lay, writhing and convulsing like a stricken snake, giving vent to the most piteous lamentations, mingled with the bitterest complainings and the most fearful curses. In truth, it was an awful spectacle, and if Dick Melmoth's heart was too much steeled against the kind sympathies of human nature to experience any real commiseration for the unhappy man, he was at all events shocked and horrified at the appalling nature of his anguish and despair. The paroxysm of almost mortal agony lasted for several minutes, and then Melmoth ventured to remind the doomed criminal that the turnkey would speedily be coming back.

"Ah! wretch that I am," he exclaimed, springing up once more from the pallet as suddenly as if galvanized, "every ground of hope is slipping away from beneath my feet, even as the drop itself shall glide away from under me when the last tremendous moment comes. But tell me, tell me, is all lost? Do you mean to abandon me to my fate? My God! you cannot have the hearts, you and Mr. Coffin, to do it. Remember, it is through you, your folly, your indiscretion, that I am deprived of the means of paying you."

"Don't you think that it's possible for you to get a thousand guineas anywhere else?" asked Dick Melmoth.

"No, nor a thousand pence," cried Emmerson, wringing his hands in despair, while his distorted features, ashy lips, gleaming eyes, and corrugating brows rendered his countenance absolutely awful; for it seemed as if there were not a nerve, nor a tendon, nor a fibre in that man's frame that did not vibrate to the touch of the heart's strong agony, not a pulse in his whole body that did not beat in sympathy with the maddening excruciation of his soul, not a vein nor an artery in which the blood did not course with the velocity of lightning and with the torturing sensation as if that blood were molten lead.

"Then you have really no hope?" said Melmoth, inquiringly.

"Hope! yes, in you and your master, for you cannot abandon me now."

"But the risk that is to be run, who is to pay us for that?"

"Risk!" cried Emmerson. "But do I not run a risk also?"

"Yes, but you are sentenced to be hanged," rejoined Melmoth, with more truth than delicacy, "while me and Coffin are not."

Emmerson was petrified all in a moment by this answer. The workings of his countenance suddenly ceased, its ghastliness of expression becoming fixed and stereotyped on his features, but without movability, while he gazed upon Dick Melmoth in mingled horror and consternation.

In the middle of this strange scene the approaching steps of the gaol functionary, and the clanking of his keys along the stone corridor without, met the ears of Emmerson and Melmoth.

"Heavens, he comes!" suddenly whispered the former, "and nothing is decided."

"No, there is nothing to decide now," replied Dick. "Come, sit down, make haste, and let me shave you."

"No, no, not for worlds could I settle myself to anything!" exclaimed Emmerson, now seized with another paroxysm of wild, excruciating anguish, and again did he toss himself upon the bed, where he lay writhing fearfully as the turnkey entered the cell.

"He's not in a state of mind to be shaved this morning," said Dick Melmoth, in a whisper to that functionary. "The fit took him the moment after you locked us in together, and it's lasted ever since. I don't think he's in his right mind."

"Well, then, we must send the doctor to him," remarked the turnkey, coolly.

Thereupon Dick Melmoth quitted the condemned cell, and shortly afterward, when Emmerson regained some degree of composure, he found the prison chaplain and surgeon by his bedside.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LAST HOPE

The miserable man gazed for some time upon the two gentlemen without recognizing them, although he had seen them both several times since his incarceration in Newgate, but as the paroxysm of his ineffable anguish subsided, he felt stunned and stupefied by the consternation which succeeded. In his soul there was a profound sense of the ruin of every hope, while the vista of his confused and darkling ideas was closed by the ominous looming of a gibbet. Vacantly, then, did he gaze upon the chaplain and the surgeon, and his eyes seemed to denote a sort of palsy of the brain.

The chaplain began to speak, enjoining the wretched man to tranquillize himself; while the surgeon felt his pulse and nodded encouragingly to the reverend ordinary, as much as to imply that he would soon recover his mental equilibrium. And it was so. Gradually did Emmerson's ideas settle themselves in his brain, and he began to understand the words that were addressed to him. On thus recognizing the chaplain and the surgeon, he felt an instinctive necessity of exercising control over himself, and while pondering this idea in his mind, the thought struck him that if he did not do so, he would most likely have a turnkey set to watch him, in which case, farewell to every hope of escaping from that dreadful place.

Recovering his composure, then, he began to talk rationally, observing that it was a sudden and overpowering paroxysm of feeling which had seized upon him, but that the holy words of the chaplain had now poured solace down into his soul.

The reverend gentleman and the surgeon shortly after

quitted the doomed man, who accordingly once more remained alone in his dungeon. Then he sat himself down at the table with the air of one who means to hold serious communing with himself. He set to work, as it were, in the difficult task of unravelling the tangled skein of his own thoughts, so that he might come to some definite conclusion as to what was to be done, or as to whether there was anything to be done at all. He said to himself, "Now let me think without excitement, as coolly as I can," and then he began to enumerate all his late friends and acquaintances, to ascertain whether there might not be one amongst them who was likely to advance a sum of money at his wife's request. Then, despite all his endeavours to reason calmly and collectedly, would come the withering, blighting thought, fatal as the blast of the simoom upon the desert, that no one would lend money to the family of a man who was doomed to be hanged. He had been a usurer himself, and he had never lent money without a security, or without a selfish purpose. Who would lend money, then, to his wife without security, and in the absence of any personal object to serve? No, not a soul.

As he came to this conclusion, he sat in the stupor of dismay, gazing vacantly before him, but in reality seeing nothing outwardly, though inwardly his mind was busy with all kinds of harrowing thoughts. Then he insensibly fell into the most torturing imaginings. His fancy became marvellously fertile and wonderfully ingenious, conjuring up the whole hideous panorama presented by the Old Bailey on an execution day. He beheld the gathered multitudes, the windows thronged with human faces, the front of Newgate, so ominous in its aspect even on the sunniest day, and the gallows standing on the edge of the pavement at the debtor's-door. Gradually, like a dissolving view, did the scene change on the theatre of his fevered fancy, and he now beheld the interior of the gaol on the execution morning. He thought that he saw the cell door open, the sheriff, the chaplain, the governor, and the other functionaries enter, accompanied by an individual whose sinister aspect denoted who he was. Then he thought that this individual pinioned him, and that he passed out of the cell, joining in the procession that was formed, and with solemn march threaded the numerous passages leading to the gibbet. Again, in imagination, did

he behold all the scene outside, which appeared to burst this time on his view with exceeding abruptness as he emerged forth from the debtor's-door; and then he thought he ascended the steps of the scaffold, that he stood beneath the fatal beam, that the rope was fastened around his neck, and the nightcap drawn over his face. So vividly did the wretched man depict all this to himself, thus dreaming horribly in broad daylight and while wide awake, that he groaned in the bitterness and the agony of his feelings, and this very sound which ascended up from the depths of his soul awoke him, as it were, from his frightful reverie.

"Thank God! it was only fancy," he said, aloud; but the next moment, as his eyes glanced around the cell and showed him every feature of that living sepulchre whence there was scarcely more than one step to the grave which would be hollowed to receive him in the stone passage outside, he shuddered to the extremest confines of his being, while the appalling conviction struck upon him that, though it was all fancy at the present moment, yet full soon it must be a frightful reality.

Presently his wife and daughter came, and he overwhelmed them with the bitterest reproaches on account of the seizure of the money by the sheriff's myrmidons. As if it were their fault! But he was in that fearful mood which requires to vent its spleen and malignity upon some one. He accordingly laid the whole blame to them. They should have secured the money elsewhere, they should have denied that they had any, they should not have allowed the search, in fact, according to his account, there were a thousand things which they should have done upon the occasion, but which they did not do.

Suddenly a thought struck him, — yes, a new hope, flashing up like a spark thrown off all in a moment from the fever-heat of his imagination. And now he became all coaxing and good humour and cajolery and fawning meanness toward his wife and daughter, whom he had just been abusing so bitterly and loading with such coarse invectives; but he wished them to take in hand this new idea which had occurred to him, and which had so promptly sprung up into the consistency of hope in his mind.

His wife must at once present a memorial to the government, beseeching it to abandon its claim upon the money

seized by the sheriff. This was Emmerson's new idea, and having done his best to conciliate his wife and daughter, he proceeded to explain what they were to do. They must at once go and get the memorial drawn up by a law-stationer, who could do it in an hour or two, at the outside. Then they must go to the Home Secretary, either that evening or betimes on the following day, and get the Minister to submit it at once to the prince regent. In fact, Emmerson, rendered almost sanguine in this new hope, assured his wife that the plan must succeed if she only managed it properly. She promised to do her best, indeed, to follow all his directions, and then, with the heat of impatience that she should at once commence the work, he hurried her and Arabella away.

A week now passed. We could, if we chose, pause to analyze every feeling which the unhappy man experienced during this interval; we might dissect all the varying emotions that made up the sum of his heart's fevered existence for those seven days. But to do this would be not merely to occupy pages or to fill chapters, but to engage whole volumes. For a week in the life of a man in the great world, moving about at freedom, not knowing when death will come, and not troubling himself, either, about the matter, is a space of time of comparatively little importance, and is so readily flung away. A week's holiday, a week's pleasure, a week's shooting, a week at the seaside, thus lightly, casually, and indifferently may a week be spoken of and passed. But a week to the man who is doomed to die, who has heard his death-sentence pronounced, who is locked up and chained within the massive walls of a dungeon, so that he may not fly from that sentence, who knows that unless something should occur to save him he must be led forth to die on a particular day, at a particular hour, and even within a few minutes more or less of that hour — oh, to a man in such a condition as this a week is so precious that every moment may be enumerated, and not a single instant may be wasted. In that week, then, his thoughts are things, his ideas are facts. The minutest sentiment that his imagination experiences has all the gravity of an important incident, his very looks express worlds of emotion. To grapple, therefore, with a subject so vast, so immense, so illimitable as this were impossible for any writer. But, oh, does not the bare idea

of the rending excruciations, the agonizing crucifixions which the doomed man thus endures, does it not, we ask, furnish a tremendous argument against the punishment of death?

It was a week of such mental tortures as these which Emmerson endured. Still did he cling to that last hope which he had conceived, and which was based upon the memorial to the Crown. But the bare fact of his entertaining such a hope aggravated the agonies of suspense and kept his mind in a continual whirl of exciting fears, misgivings, and apprehensions, with the equally harrowing, wearing, tearing process of endeavouring to reason against them. Yes, thus did a week pass. The memorial had been duly drawn up according to his instructions, and it had been sent to the Home Secretary, who declined to receive Mrs. Emmerson personally on the subject. It had been sent, then, and the cold, formal answer was returned that it would receive attention and be laid before his Royal Highness the Prince Regent in due course. Then day after day passed, no further notice was taken of the memorial, and thus had a whole week elapsed.

One morning, at the expiration of the interval just named, the governor of Newgate entered the condemned cell, and the wretched Emmerson immediately saw that some dreadful announcement was forthcoming. And it was so. After a few prefatory remarks, of what the governor considered to be of a suitable character, he proceeded to state that the recorder had made his report to the prince regent, and that Emmerson's execution was fixed to take place on the following Monday. This was Friday, and Emmerson might now not merely calculate the days, not only the hours, but likewise the very minutes he had to live.

When again alone, he sat down upon his bed, covered his face with his hands, and moaned bitterly. Death now seemed to be looking him in the face, and such a dreadful death, too. But the memorial? Surely some attention must have been paid to it? If so, and if the money were to be returned, was there not yet time to do all that was needed to accomplish his release? Yes; and now the infatuated man, once more abandoning himself to hope, began to calculate how much might be done in the space of time still remaining. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, three whole

days, and in that interval a thousand rescues might be achieved.

Presently his wife and daughter made their appearance. The former looked really and truly sorrowful, the latter was weeping bitterly; for on arriving at the prison they were told by the governor that the recorder's report had been made, that no commutation of the death-sentence had been ordered, but that the execution was fixed for the ensuing Monday. Therefore, as they entered the condemned cell on this occasion, they felt as if they were coming into the presence of the dead, and Emmerson, with all the keenness which the horrors of his situation had given to every faculty, at once comprehended what they felt and what was passing in their minds.

"Ah! you have heard the news, then?" he exclaimed, "and now you are aware of how long a time I have to live, unless, indeed, something strenuous, something determined and prompt, is done at once on my behalf."

"But what can be done?" asked Arabella, who could not help thinking that her father disengaged himself somewhat quickly and even petulantly from her embrace. "You see no reply is sent to the memorial."

"That is the very thing I wish you to see about at once. You have neglected it, you have not done your duty, you should have gone day after day and hour after hour to the Home Office. Good God! do you know what it is that depends upon that memorial? It is a life, a human life — my life!" and the wretched man shrieked out the words in frenzied anguish.

"Compose yourself, dear father, for God's sake, compose yourself," said Arabella. "Mother and I will at once go off to the Home Office."

"Yes, go, for Heaven's sake, go, my dear wife, my dear daughter," exclaimed Emmerson, still in wild accents and with almost frantic impetuosity of manner. "Forgive me if I have been harsh or unkind, if I have said anything cruel or hasty. But, O God! you know not how fearfully, how tremendously a man's temper is tried, ay, and how goadingly his nerves are excited, by such a position as this. Look you both for a moment," he continued, with so ghastly an expression of countenance that the feelings it indicated were beyond all power of utterance, as they are likewise

beyond the possibility of description, "look, I say. I am alive now. Here, I can walk. See, I can walk across this room — no, cell we will call it, for so it is, and I can move my arms, too. Look, I can extend them in any direction I choose. And observe, as I stretch out my hands, I can move about my fingers, and there is vitality in them, and the very nails themselves show animation and life. Then, look at my eyes. I can see with them, and they also are indicative of life. You hear me talking. My lips move, my tongue moves, also, and my voice sounds upon your ear. Yes, and I can think, too — Eternal God! how acute is that power of thought which thou hast given unto man! Moreover, I can hear my heart beat, and in all respects I have a consciousness of life, a knowledge that I am alive, a conviction that I am a moving, sentient, animated being. Well, all this you know, and I know, too. But a day, an hour, even a very minute is fixed when all this is to cease. Those vital energies and living faculties which I have been describing are not gradually to waste themselves out and expire by degrees, but are to be extinguished all in a moment. Yes, there will be one instant when it shall be alive, capable of moving, thinking and speaking, as I move, think, and speak now, and the next instant all will be over. The power of thought, movement, and speech will be annihilated in a moment. It will be the same as suddenly extinguishing a lamp, just the same as suddenly turning off the gas in a room, while the eye winks, changing everything from light to darkness. Now, such is my doom, unless you prove successful in getting back the money, so as to use it as a means for my deliverance."

It was a fearful thing to hear that condemned man thus reason, with a mingled frenzy and philosophy, upon his dread position. There was a wildness so awful, but at the same time so ghastly in his looks, that it made him seem as if it were a maniac talking reason, as if a horrible lucidity of language was united with a shocking rabidness of feeling. A deep, deep impression was made upon the wife and daughter. The cold indifference of the former, which had already yielded to sorrow, now melted into bitter tears, and the genuine grief of the latter was enhanced into the wildest despair. Altogether it was indeed an awful, awful

spectacle and one which does no credit to the boasted humanity, wisdom, and justice of England's laws.

But now let us pause for a few moments to ascertain the reason why the memorial sent to the Home Office had not as yet received any attention. It was not so much the fault of the Minister as that of the prince regent. The Minister had gone with it in his pocket half a dozen times to Carlton House, during the week that had elapsed; but on one occasion "his Royal Highness was so particularly engaged (in Venetia's boudoir) that he could not see anybody;" on another occasion "he was so very seriously indisposed (being awfully drunk) that he could not attend to business." Next time "he was engaged in a matter of great domestic delicacy" (with a troop of dancing-girls in one of his gorgeous saloons); and on the fourth occasion "he had met with so severe an accident (through tripping on the stairs when drunk and incapable) that his physician had ordered him not to be disturbed." On another occasion "his Royal Highness had gone to Windsor to manifest his filial regard toward an afflicted sire" (in reality to see how long the old boy was likely to be before he hopped the twig); and another time when the Minister did succeed in gaining access to his Royal Highness, "he was so overcome by his feelings (Curaçoa punch) on hearing the nature of the memorial, that he burst into tears (or, in vulgar parlance, was crying drunk) and begged that the matter might be postponed to a future occasion."

Such were the reasons which must account for the silence that had been observed relative to Mrs. Emmerson's memorial. But when she and Arabella repaired to the Home Office, after the interview with Emmerson as above described, they did succeed in obtaining an interview with the Minister, who addressed them in the following terms:

"Ladies, I can assure you that I lost no time in submitting your memorial to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent; and his Royal Highness, with that compassionating disposition which so nobly characterizes him, and with that zeal and anxiety which he ever experiences to do justice to all his august father's dutiful and loving subjects, at once took the memorial under his royal consideration. What advice I, as a Cabinet Minister, may have given his Royal Highness

on the subject, cannot of course be revealed, and whatever view his Royal Highness has as yet been induced to take of the matter, must not be disclosed. Ladies, I hope that this explanation will prove completely satisfactory; and in the unfortunate position in which you are placed, it must be a source of great consolation, not to say gratification, to you to know that you possess a prince who, while exercising his august father's authority, devotes himself, night and day, to the interests of all classes in the kingdom."

Having thus spoken, with the proper ministerial mixture of official pomposity and diplomatic blandness, the Home Secretary rang the bell, as much as to intimate that the interview was at an end. Mrs. Emmerson was completely bewildered, having vainly endeavoured to discover in that cloud of words an answer to her question relative to the fate of the memorial, and she was about to withdraw, thinking that the answer must have been given, but that she had not comprehended it. Arabella, somewhat more sharp-witted, perceived that no definite reply had been given at all, and she accordingly ventured to remind the Home Minister that he had forgotten the main point for which he so condescendingly granted herself and mother an interview. Thereupon the Minister gave an assurance that the matter should have his very best consideration next week.

"Next week!" shrieked forth Arabella, unmindful of what she said, "but you have ordered my unhappy father to undergo his sentence next Monday."

"Miss Emmerson," returned the Minister, in an offhand manner, "it can make no earthly difference to your father whether you get back the money before or after Monday next. His concerns with this life are terminated."

Thereupon he again rang the bell, and the two ladies withdrew. A livery servant conducted them down-stairs, while descending which they exchanged looks of blank despair. They now reëntered the hackney-coach which had brought them to Downing Street, and hastened back to Newgate, where they imparted to Emmerson the details of their interview with the Home Secretary.

"Then all hope has now abandoned me!" exclaimed the unhappy man, and flinging himself upon the bed, he gave way to an awful outburst of the most violent mental agony.

It was Sunday night, and the last hours of the doomed man's life were slowly lapsing into the eternity of the past. He had no more hope now. Indeed, he sought as well as he could to avert his reflections from the affairs of this world.

He had taken leave of his wife and daughter, and when that was over, he felt as if the last straw of hope at which it was possible for him to catch had disappeared. Not that through any feeling of fondness he beheld in them the personification of tender ties linking him to this life, but because it seemed as if there were nothing more to be done by them for the purpose of saving that life. He now felt that he was indeed doomed, that his fate was inevitable, and that in a few short hours he should be no more.

Not one wink of sleep did the unhappy man obtain throughout that night. He had slept his last sleep in this life, and the present vigil was to close only in the stupendous sleep of death.

Alone he sat in his cell, where a candle burned dimly and fitfully. The Bible was spread open before him, but he could not settle his ideas to read it. Horrible thoughts were agitating in his mind, like grisly phantoms peopling a dark Gothic hall in some ancient castle. He felt as a man who is slowly but surely and irresistibly walking toward the edge of a precipice, over which at a fixed hour, and indeed at a fixed moment, he will fall abruptly. His physical sensations were as intense as his mental ones. His head ached to distraction; it was such a headache as no ordinary experience in such pain can possibly understand. There was a fulness about the temples that seemed as if the brain were swelling to a compass too large to be contained within the skull, and that it was trying to burst through its walls of bone, and flesh, and skin, but could not. There was an excruciating tightness across the eyes, as if a ligature were bound around the head, without interfering with the sight, but drawn to a degree of tension as to become a veritable martyrdom. Besides this agonizing pain, there was a sense of deep oppression at the chest, and in the stomach a profound sinking, as if all were hollow within and the flesh were about to give way. In addition to these sensations, there was a nervous movement of the toes, accompanied by a noise like the cracking of the bones in the feet, especially if the unhappy man rose to pace his cell, as he frequently did in

the depth of that long night which seemed to him a thousand years. Then did this ominous cracking of the bones appear redolent of death itself, and made him fancy that he was a moving corpse, a walking skeleton.

As morning came on, the various sensations of pain and uneasiness which the doomed man felt augmented in intenseness. Indeed, the headache grew insupportable, the tightness across the eyes more full of anguish than aught he could possibly have conceived. Once or twice he lay down in the hope that a reclining posture would give him relief, but the agony became all the more severe, and indeed the fearful excitement of his thoughts would not permit him to remain stationary.

As the dawn glimmered into that condemned cell, and about the same time the candle expired in its socket, the approach of day seemed to add to the already insupportable pain in the temples, while the tightness over the eyes made him feel as if an iron hoop had been fastened around his head and was now being screwed up to its last hold.

The chaplain presently entered the condemned cell, and began to offer the consolations of religion. Emmerson sat down and listened, but he could not fix his thoughts upon anything the reverend gentleman said. He tried to comprehend the ordinary's words, but could not. His brain was confused, but not with a numbness; it was racked with the bewilderment of a myriad torturing, harrowing, agonizing thoughts.

The morning advanced, and breakfast was brought in to the convict. He endeavoured to drink some coffee, but it seemed to choke him. He could not possibly get his throat to perform its usual functions and swallow it; and when he essayed to force himself to eat a mouthful of bread, it was the same as if he tried to masticate an object as dry as a cinder. Again he attempted to drink, but it was with a strong recoil, a loathing, and a powerlessness to swallow, as if he were seized with hydrophobia.

Again did the chaplain endeavour to fix him to his devotions, but though Emmerson would sit for ten minutes at a time gazing on the reverend gentleman, and to all appearance listening intently, devoutly, yet he really distinguished nought that was said, merely heard a humming, droning noise that seemed to have no sense nor meaning. Then he

would start up and walk wildly to and fro in his cell, the cracking of his bones mingling horribly with the clanking of his chains, and then he would sit down on his pallet and give way to a violent outburst of anguish. Or else he would begin to load himself with bitterest reproaches for having been so mad as to have done the deed that made him what he was, a doomed man.

Thus did the time pass away until eight o'clock, the fatal hour, was approaching. Then at every sound which met his ear did the pulses quiver throughout his frame with an agony beyond all description. Each time he thought they were coming to bear him away to death. At length the door opened, and the heralds of his doom made their appearances, governor, sheriffs, under-sheriffs, javelin-men, and, last of all, an individual whose sinister look was more than enough to tell who he was and proclaim his errand.

And now commenced the dread ceremony of knocking off the irons from the doomed man's limbs, and then the process of pinioning, to all of which he submitted without the slightest resistance. Resistance indeed! The idea did not once enter his head, for strong and firm and indomitable upon him sat the conviction that his fate was at hand and that nothing could avert it.

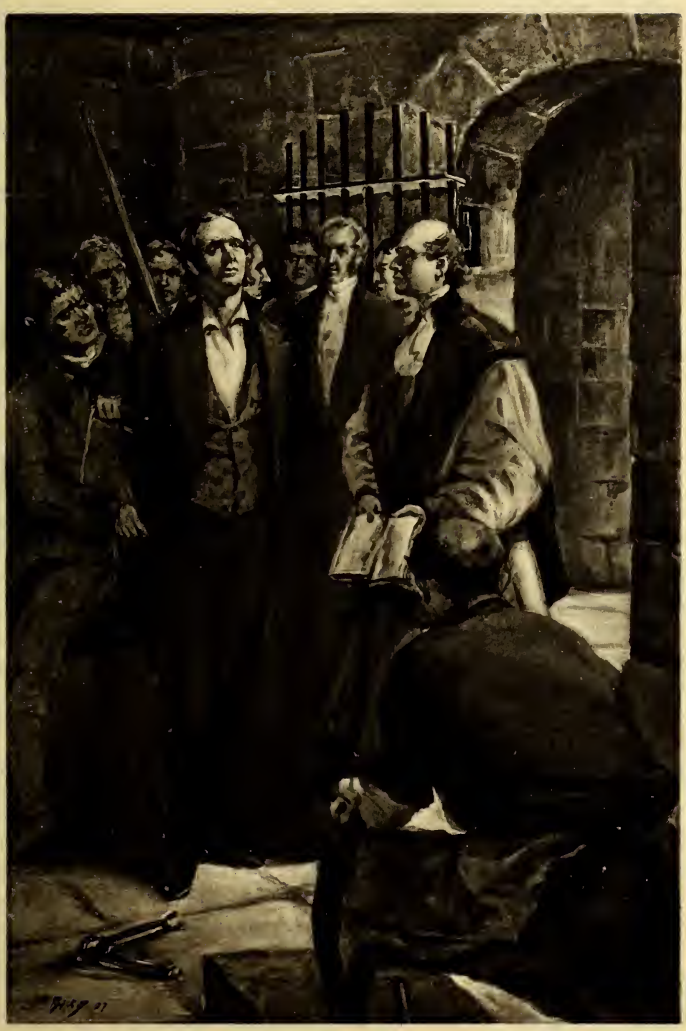
The preliminaries being all settled, and Daniel Coffin having thus far made his preparatory arrangements, the procession of death began moving away from the condemned cell, through the stone passages, to the scaffold. All that Emmerson had previously pictured to himself in the dread phases of those reveries of which we have before spoken was now not merely realized, but even transcended in all the horror of reality. Vain were it for us to attempt to delineate the feelings which he experienced as he walked on to death, advancing toward the edge of that precipice over which he was to topple suddenly, Heaven alone knew into what realm to pass.

And now he reaches the debtor's-door, and the whole panorama of life and excitement and animation without bursts upon his view. He ascends the scaffold, and the newspapers, in giving an account next morning of the execution, declared that he went up the ladder with firm steps. Ah! it was no spontaneous and willing fortitude which he thus evinced, no deliberate evidence of a mind nerved to

"HIS PLATE WAS AT HAND."

Photographed from original by Bird.

"HIS FATE WAS AT HAND"
Photogravure from original by Bird.



and the chaplain was droning forth the solemn service for the dead. A breathless silence seemed to sit like a spell upon the multitude, and all this while the sun was shining bright in its golden glory upon the tremendous scene. And in the midst of those sounds of church bell and of prayer, in the midst of that deep, stupendous silence which hushed the breath of ten thousand spectators gathered there, and in the midst, too, of the glow of the effulgent sunlight, did the last phase of the tragedy suddenly take place. The bolt was drawn, the drop fell, and in a few seconds all was over.

The once eminent City money-broker was dead, and the crowd waited an hour to see him taken down. Be assured, reader, that Theodore Varian remained until the very last. Yes, he remained until the clock struck nine, when Daniel Coffin cut the corpse down and let it fall into the shell which was ready for its reception in the hollow of the scaffold.

There was now no more to see. Theodore Varian had pursued his vengeance up to the very last, and as the crowds dispersed slowly, he took his departure more slowly still, as if still inclined to linger, with a sort of horrible morbid gloating, near the spot where his mortal enemy had just gone out of existence.

But on leaving that fatal scene did he at once return to his sister Ariadne, to tell her how Emmerson had died and all the particulars of the execution? No, for Ariadne would have shrunk from such abhorrent details.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

VALENTINE MALVERN

The reader will remember that conversation which took place between the beautiful Florence Eaton and the handsome Valentine Malvern on the day when their love for each other was revealed. In their mutual frankness they had laid bare their hearts' secrets, and while Valentine candidly informed Florence that he could never rest quiet until he should have penetrated the mystery of his father's fate, the young lady confessed to him that the particulars of her interview with the prince regent at St. James's Palace some months previously had appeared to interweave themselves with her destiny. The reader perhaps will likewise remember that Valentine promised to do his best in order to discover if there were indeed any particular secret connected with the proceedings of that interview, and with the miniature which had produced so powerful a sensation upon his Royal Highness.

On subsequently reflecting with due calmness upon this pledge which he had given, Valentine felt annoyed with himself, for he knew not how he could possibly take any steps in the matter. Besides, he considered that if there were really anything to tell, and anything with which Florence herself might in propriety be made acquainted, Lady Florimel would not have kept her in the dark upon the subject. Therefore for him to interfere in any way seemed an unwarrantable meddling in a delicate matter, and hence was it that Valentine regretted having given anything like a promise at all. But on each occasion that he saw Florence she more or less alluded to the subject, and it was indeed easy to perceive that it had made a most powerful impression upon her mind. Malvern endeavoured to reason her out of

a belief which was thus unmistakably gaining a sort of superstitious ascendency over her, but she assured him that so strong was the influence thus left upon her imagination by the occurrences of the interview with the prince that unless the mystery were cleared up it would produce the effect of a secret grief preying upon her mind.

"I know," Florence would say to her lover, on those occasions when they were alone together, and the topic was touched upon, "that you must think me foolish and weak-minded to suffer that occurrence to wield such a power over me. But I cannot help it. It is a feeling against which there is no battling, no struggling. It is stronger than I, and capable of subduing any amount of mental energy which I possess. It is a presentiment which has entered into my mind, and now forms part of it. It is as if the mysterious voice of an inward nature were speaking in my soul."

In such language as this would the beautiful Florence Eaton address Valentine when they were together; and as he was now her acknowledged suitor, not only accepted by herself but also formally recognized as such by Lord and Lady Florimel, he was a daily visitor at the house. Often did he represent to Florence that the most prudent step to be taken would be either for her to confess, or for him to represent, to Lord and Lady Florimel the nature of the mystic feelings which were thus preying, as it were, upon her. Yielding to his advice, and being unwilling that any steps should be taken which might savour of undutifulness or of ingratitude toward her kind relatives, Florence at length gave Valentine permission to adopt exactly what course he might think fit in the matter. He accordingly at once resolved to be candid and explicit with Lady Florimel, and seeking an immediate interview with her, he explained all that Florence had at any time said to him relative to the impression made upon her mind by the interview with the prince regent and the affair of the miniature portrait.

Pauline listened with the deepest attention and with an equal amount of interest. Her countenance grew serious, with a shade of melancholy also, as Valentine proceeded, and when he had finished she remained for some time silent and lost in thought.

"My dear Mr. Malvern," she said, at length breaking silence, "as the future husband of my much-loved niece,

you have a right to demand every explanation relative to anything that may seem to concern her. Yes, there is indeed a secret connected with that dear girl, a secret which also regards one who when alive was most dear unto myself, — I mean my sister, the mother of Florence. Fain would I that this secret should have remained entombed with her who has long ago gone down into the silent grave, but it seems to me now as if fate has determined that it shall be otherwise. However, this secret is not entirely at my own disposal, nor indeed should I of my own accord feel justified in revealing it."

She paused, sighed profoundly, and gazed with melancholy looks upon a portrait of Octavia, her departed sister, which hung in the room where this interview took place. Valentine Malvern said nothing. Indeed, he knew not what to say; he was almost sorry that he had entered upon the topic at all, and yet it was so absolutely necessary to take some step to satisfy his beloved Florence.

" Yes," continued Pauline, in melancholy accents, while her truly handsome countenance was shaded with a kindred expression, " both I and my husband have observed for some months past that the incidents at the palace were not forgotten by Florence. Deeply have I regretted that I ever should have taken her thither, and have thus placed her in a position of receiving impressions which, when nature's voice speaks out thus, are indeed but too well calculated to make a powerful impression upon her young, artless, and susceptible mind. Until now it has always been my endeavour as well as my hope to conceal from Florence a secret the knowledge of which is by no means necessary to her happiness and welfare, but which may interfere with the healthy equanimity of her mind. But it seems, as I have already said, that this secret is not to be concealed, and therefore, since fate has decreed that it must be made known, as well now as at any future period. But again I repeat, my dear Mr. Malvern, that from my lips you cannot learn it. This secret is not altogether mine, and from the individual whom it more especially concerns must you seek the revelation of the mystery. Go to him, therefore, go forthwith, tell him who you are, that you are the accepted suitor of Florence Eaton, and that you have come to learn from his lips all he may choose to reveal concerning her."

"But you have not named him — I mean the personage to whom your ladyship alludes," exclaimed Valentine, though more than half-suspecting who it was that her words thus indicated, — yes, and likewise already beginning to entertain some conception of the nature of that secret he was seeking to penetrate.

"The personage to whom you are to address yourself," replied Pauline, solemnly, "is his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. I can now tell you no more. Go and see him at once."

With these words Lady Florimel rose abruptly from her seat and hurried from the room, in order to seek the solitude of her own chamber and give vent to the varied feelings of affliction and sorrow which the preceding discourse conjured up. Then, so soon as she had somewhat composed her mind, she despatched a hasty note to the prince regent, giving a few necessary explanations, so that he might not be altogether unprepared for the visit of Valentine Malvern.

Immediately after his interview with Lady Florimel, Malvern returned to the apartment where Florence was anxiously awaiting him, and the moment he reéntered that room, she hastened to meet him, gazing up into his countenance with an expression of mingled curiosity, interest, and timidity.

"Your aunt, dear Florence, and I," commenced Valentine, "have had a most serious conversation together. She is not offended with you; she is not angry at the questions which have been put to her. On the contrary, she herself has seen the influence which that occurrence at St. James's Palace produced upon your mind, and she admits that the time is come when the secret must be revealed to you."

"Ah! then there is a secret," exclaimed Florence, an expression of intense anxiety now appearing upon her lovely countenance.

"Yes, there is a secret, dearest," returned Valentine, "but as yet I know it not. It is to be learned elsewhere, and I am now about to proceed in the investigation. Ask me no more questions at the present moment. I go at once upon this mission. On my return you will perhaps know all. An hour or two, or, if not to-day, most assuredly to-morrow, will clear up all your suspense. Can you not, dearest Florence, control your feelings?"

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed. "Were I so weak-minded as not to be able to do that, I should scarcely be worthy of your esteem and confidence. Besides, if for months past I have supported and borne up against this torturing influence which has been gnawing, as it were, at my very heart's core, surely I can now endure suspense for a few hours, or even a few days longer. Go, then, Valentine, and accomplish your mission, whatever and wherever it may be. I ask no more at present."

The young gentleman embraced the beautiful girl, and then took his leave.

It was now three o'clock in the afternoon, and Valentine knew it to be a very likely hour to obtain an audience of his Royal Highness. He accordingly repaired at once to Carlton House, entered the waiting-room, and gave his card in the usual manner to the principal valet in attendance. In about a quarter of an hour Malvern was informed that his Royal Highness was most particularly engaged for the present, but that if he would return at nine o'clock in the evening, the prince would cheerfully grant him an interview, and indeed wished, on his own part, to see him.

Thereupon Valentine Malvern took his departure from Carlton House, wondering what the last portion of the message could mean. But he did not go back again that afternoon to Florence. He thought it likely that not only she and her aunt might have some serious conversation together after what had taken place, but he likewise felt that it was better not to provoke any mental excitement by running backwards and forwards merely to acquaint her with what was being done. Accordingly, to while away the time until his dinner-hour, Malvern proceeded to Long Acre, where he called upon Mr. Lawrence Sampson, as was indeed frequently his wont, to ascertain whether any further clue had been discovered to the mysterious disappearance of the late Sir Archibald Malvern.

"I have not lost sight of the matter, sir," said the famous Bow Street officer, in answer to Valentine's inquiries, "but the affair is still wrapped in as dark a cloud as ever. The only clue which we have obtained is that letter which shows that your father, sir, was engaged in an affair of gallantry. It is a strange thing that this letter should be in the very same identical handwriting as that one which was written

to give information about Paul Dysart, who was hanged at the Old Bailey, you remember."

"A beautiful, fluent, and ladylike writing," observed Valentine. "Indeed, it is an elegant hand. Ah! would to Heaven that we could discover the authoress!"

"Yes, sir," continued Sampson. "I myself have all along entertained the opinion that your lamented father has fallen a victim to female jealousy, because the woman who could have given Paul Dysart up to the hangman was not likely to have hesitated to avenge herself upon Sir Archibald Malvern, supposing that he had done anything to provoke her resentment."

"Your inference is a natural one," said the young gentleman. "Let me look once more at that letter of which you first spoke, and which I discovered amongst my father's papers. I think that I left it in your hands."

Larry Sampson opened an iron safe, and from a bundle of papers produced a letter which he handed Valentine, saying, "Here is the one to which you allude. The writing is as similar as possible to that other one which was sent to the magistrate at Bow Street, and which gave the information that led to the capture of Dysart. But that one I have not got now. However, you saw it at the time, and were struck by the resemblance."

Malvern took the letter which Sampson, while thus talking, handed to him, and as he perused the anonymous epistle, his countenance grew deeply mournful.

"Yes," he said, "I recollect the similitude between the two letters, recollect it as well, indeed, as if the other one were before me now. There cannot be a shadow of a doubt as to the identity of the two hands. But, by the bye, when you called upon Lady Ernestina Dysart at the time, and she informed you that she had not the slightest idea of any gallant intrigue which her husband was carrying on nor of any female who was likely to take so vindictive a step as that evidenced by the anonymous letter sent to the magistrate, she kept that anonymous letter, did she not?"

"Yes, to show to her husband, who was then in Newgate," answered Sampson. "She did not return the letter to me, and after all the trouble she gave herself in the matter, overwhelmed with calamity, too, at the time, I did not like to call a second time and ask for it."

"No, certainly not," exclaimed Malvern. "But pray do not lose sight of the inquiry altogether," he continued. "Keep this letter, and the chapter of accidents may one of these days, sooner or later, turn up something which may lead us a step farther in the investigation, perhaps elucidate the mystery altogether."

Having thus spoken, Malvern threw a bank-note upon the table by way of a "refresher" for the Bow Street officer, and then took his departure.

Precisely at nine o'clock in the evening did Valentine present himself at Carlton House, and the same valet whom he had seen in the morning at once conducted him up the splendid staircase to a small but elegant parlour in the suite of apartments specially appropriated to the prince's use. His Royal Highness was not there at the moment, and the valet requested Malvern to be seated, stating that the prince would join him in a few minutes.

When left alone, Valentine could not help admiring the tasteful richness of the furniture and the elegance of the ornaments scattered about. Notwithstanding the important matter uppermost in his thoughts, and the belief that he was about to hear some very grave and solemn secret relative to his beloved Florence, yet his well-cultivated mind could still experience an interest in the magnificence of three or four pictures which hung to the walls, the chaste elegance of a few specimens of sculptured alabaster, and likewise the rich colouring of some porcelain vases whence odours were distilled. His attention was also drawn toward the mantelpiece, where an ebony stand sustained a French ormolu clock in the middle of which there was a hollow containing several figures of men and women, about an inch in height, beautifully carved in ivory, and coloured to imitate life, all moving about in obedience to the hidden mechanism.

While standing near the chimneypiece contemplating this beautiful clock, Valentine's eyes suddenly encountered a portion of a letter which had been thrust behind another ornament on the mantel. But why does Malvern start in sudden amazement? Why do his eyes remain fixed with a strange expression upon that portion of a note? It is because, in consequence of its being torn, some of the writing is visible, and this writing bears the most perfect resemblance to that

of the note which in the afternoon he so attentively scanned at Larry Sampson's house.

Let us here pause for a moment to state that his Royal Highness had lunched by himself in this particular room in the middle of the day, and that he had afterward indulged in a cigar. A wax-taper had been placed on the table, but as the prince could not possibly bear the idea of putting his cigar in contact with the wick of a candle he had taken from his pocket a note which he had a little while previously received, and whence he tore off a portion wherewith to light the cigar. The other portion he negligently left lying on the table, and when the domestics entered at a later hour to clear away the things and put the room in order, one of them had placed the remnant of that letter on the mantel, not knowing whether it might be inquired for again or not.

Such was the way in which this portion of the letter came to be in the place where it now attracted the notice and at once riveted the gaze of Valentine Malvern. For nearly a minute did he stand motionless as a statue, but with lips apart, his countenance pale and anxious, and his eyes fixed upon the object of this profound and concentrated interest. At length, and with a sudden start, he reached forth his hand, took the note, and without further reflection or hesitation, examined it with the closest scrutiny. And who can blame him? It was an impulsive deed. A father's fate was uppermost in the young man's mind. It was no vulgar feeling of curiosity; on the contrary, it was an act produced by the generous prompting of a strong filial piety. No thought had he at the moment of penetrating into the secrets of others, or violating the sanctity of private correspondence. One sentiment, and one only, was dominant in his soul, namely, the hope of discovering something that might elucidate the mystery of a deplored father's loss.

While examining the writing to convince himself that it was the same as the two notes already alluded to, he insensibly read all that was upon this fragment of a letter which he was inspecting, and these were the words which his eyes thus followed:

"July 10, 1815.

"My dear Prince: — You will doubtless be surprised to receive a letter from me. But I am most anxious to see your Royal Highness. I am leading a life which is perfectly

miserable, — monotonous, gloomy, lonely to a degree. You, who are so fond of pleasure, must pity me in the dulness of that solitary retreat whence I write this. Indeed, I can endure it no longer, and shall be up in London to-morrow, when I shall take the liberty of calling upon your Royal Highness. But will it be a liberty? After all that has occurred between us, I hope not. Indeed, I flatter myself that I shall be welcomed by your Royal Highness. Believe me, my dear prince, I often, often think of you. Ah! if you only thought of me one-tenth part as often, I should indeed be ensured the kindest reception at your hands. However, to-morrow evening, at ten o'clock precisely, I shall put your humour to the test by presenting myself at the private staircase, when, if you mean to be amiable toward me, you will give orders that I shall not be kept waiting a moment; and I will then explain to you why it is, unless, indeed you already surmise the reasons wherefore I have withdrawn so long from London and . . ."

All the rest of the letter was torn away, but those lines which Malvern had just read, contained an important announcement. The letter had been written on the previous day. It was therefore on this very evening, at ten o'clock, that the writer of it purposed to call upon the prince regent. But who could the lady be that was evidently on such familiar terms with his Royal Highness? Was it not fair to suppose that she was some person of rank and consequence? But what a dangerous as well as profligate character she must be, thought Valentine, if she had indeed anything to do with his father's disappearance. At all events, she assuredly had surrendered Dysart up to the scaffold, and therefore was she not dangerous to a degree? As for her profligacy, it was but too evident that she had been intimate with his father and with the prince regent, most likely with Dysart also.

Such were the thoughts that passed rapidly through Malvern's brain as he hastily replaced the letter, or, rather, the fragment of a letter, upon the mantel, and scarcely had he done this when the prince regent entered the room.

Advancing with the utmost affability, and what court sycophancy would term "the most gracious condescension," he at once gave the young gentleman his hand, saying,

" Sir Valentine Malvern, for so I suppose I must call you, I bid you welcome here. Nay, be not astonished at this declaration on my part. Did not my domestic assure you to-day that I should be very glad to see you this evening? "

" I did indeed receive such a kind message from your Royal Highness," answered Valentine, " and you must permit me, sir, to express my profound gratitude."

" Sit down," said the prince, " and we will talk together. I know why you have come. Indeed, a minute or two before you called this afternoon, I received a note from Lady Florimel to tell me that you were coming, and what your object was in seeking an interview with me. I sent down to assure you that I should be glad to see you in the evening, because, as I learn from Lady Florimel's note, you are engaged to her niece, Miss Florence Eaton, and I am much interested in that young lady. Can you not suspect, have you no idea of the cause of this interest which I feel toward Florence? " and as the prince gave utterance to this question, his manner grew serious and a shade fell over his countenance, for of all his many, many mistresses, either living or dead, he could perhaps speak lightly and indifferently, but not of that bright and beauteous creature who had loved him so tenderly and so well, the injured, the ill-used, the perished Octavia.

" Some suspicion floats dimly and vaguely in my mind," answered Malvern, perceiving how much the prince was moved as he spoke, knowing how much it took to move the prince at all, and from all this receiving an additional impulse for his conjectures, " but to that suspicion I dare not give utterance."

" And why not? " asked his Royal Highness, gazing earnestly upon the young man.

" Because," he rejoined, " to breathe the suspicion which previous circumstances had engendered, and which your present words, sir, as well as your looks, have strengthened in my mind, would be to impeach the honour of a certain lady who is now no more."

The prince regent sighed; then, placing his hand in a breast-pocket, he slowly drew forth a miniature portrait, set in a morocco case, and handing it to Malvern, he said, " It is the likeness of one who loved me well, too well, too well, far better than I deserved."

"Then, sir, my suspicion is confirmed," said Valentine. "This is the mother of Florence, this was Octavia, Lady Marchmont."

"Yes, but she proved not unfaithful to her husband," answered the prince, in a low and mournful tone, for he felt not merely a sentiment of melancholy and remorse, but likewise of awe, when speaking of the dead Octavia. "Florence was born before she married Arthur Eaton, who subsequently became Lord Marchmont, and to him she proved a good, true, and faithful wife during the brief period they were allowed to remain in this world. To save the mother's reputation, Florence has always passed as the issue of that marriage."

"But she is in reality your Royal Highness's daughter?" said Malvern. "Oh, how inscrutable are the ways of Providence! how strange and mysterious are the instincts which stir within us! The voice of nature has been crying in her soul, her heart has yearned toward you, her father. She saw you grieved and afflicted on the occasion of that interview at St. James's Palace, and it touched the tenderest chord in her being. It was to a father's feeling that this chord responsively vibrated, and she was stricken, as it were, with a deathless sentiment toward you. She has told me that she could not be happy so long as that mysterious sensation hung quivering, as it were, in the depths of her soul, and I vowed to discover whether there was any reality in her presentient feelings, or whether she was labouring under some morbid delusion."

"Think you that she will be happier," asked the prince, "by the knowledge of this secret, or will she not feel deep sorrow at the history of what she may conceive to be a mother's shame? Take care, Malvern, how you break these tidings to her, and how you tell her the tale. I would sooner hear that harm had happened to my own legitimate daughter, the Princess Charlotte, than know that the blight of affliction had fallen upon the heart of this sweet, this angelic girl."

It was a strange thing to hear the prince regent talk thus, for it was with a genuine emphasis and an unquestionable sincerity that he gave utterance to this solemn averment. Valentine was, of course, no stranger to the profligacy of his character, the dissolutenes of his life, and the

heartlessness of his disposition. He therefore knew that it must indeed be some powerful and exceptional sentiment that thus could bend a mind so callous and leave an impression upon a soul so saturated with all vices and demoralizing influences.

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured," said Malvern, deeply affected, "that the secret shall be revealed to Florence in the most delicate manner possible. Lady Florimel will no doubt undertake the task herself. What person can be more fitted to do this than the amiable, the excellent, the kind-hearted relative who has been a mother to the orphan girl? But Lady Florimel felt that the secret was not her own, and must not be revealed without your Royal Highness's permission. That permission you now give?"

"Yes, freely, freely," responded the prince. "And yet it were better, so far as the world is concerned, that this secret should still remain confined to the knowledge of as few as possible."

"Undoubtedly," exclaimed Malvern. "It were madness, it were wickedness, as well as being needless and useless to throw a stain upon the memory of Florence's departed mother."

"This being the understanding," resumed the prince, "I shall not attend your bridal, but my best wishes will be with you. And permit me to offer something more substantial than good wishes. What can I do for you? I have everything to give except money, and that, God knows, all prince and almost sovereign as I am, is scarce enough with me. But you are rich, I am told, and the Florimels are rich; therefore money you need not. Will you have a peerage? An excuse can easily be found for conferring it upon you."

"Accept my gratitude, sir, for this well-meant proposal," answered Valentine, "but I most respectfully decline it. I seek not honours and titles. If it should appear in the end, as I am afraid, indeed, it will, that my lamented father is no more, then am I already a baronet, and even if he should yet reappear, which, though so much to be desired, is so little probable, still do I remain the heir to his title. That title is sufficient for my ambition."

At this moment the door of the apartment opened, and Lady Sackville entered, hastily exclaiming, "Prince, why

have you left us thus? The whole company are crying out for you, and I have been looking everywhere — "

But here the brilliant Venetia stopped short, and a sudden pallor appeared upon her countenance, as well as a confusion in her manner, as her eyes now met the looks of Valentine Malvern. For he had his back toward the door at the moment she made her appearance, and now, as he rose from his seat and turned toward her, such was the impression he made upon her. As for himself, he surveyed her with evident interest, indeed, with a renewal of that feeling of mingled surprise and uncertainty which he had experienced when he saw her at St. George's Church on the day of her marriage.

" Are you acquainted with each other? " inquired the prince, " or shall I introduce you? "

" Sir Valentine Malvern, I believe? " exclaimed Venetia, recovering in a moment all her wonted presence of mind, and advancing with the utmost affability toward the young gentleman, she at once gave him her hand, observing, " Oh, yes, we are no strangers to each other," but at the same time she threw a look of the deepest meaning upon Valentine, as much as to imply that no more need be said upon the circumstance of their previous acquaintance, or how, when, and where they had met on any former occasion.

Venetia was grandly beautiful this night. She was giving a splendid entertainment in her own suite of apartments, and was attired in a sort of fancy dress as Queen of the Revels. She wore upon her head a jewelled diadem, which, bright though it were, was not more lustrous than the rich auburn of her own shining hair. Her robe was trimmed with ermine, and altogether she had a queenly look.

" Will you come and join us in the gay festivity which is now at its height? " she asked of Malvern, and her smile was full of a cordial welcome; indeed, its affability was in itself an eloquent though mute proffer of friendship.

" I thank your ladyship," answered Valentine, his manner now displaying the sentiment of interest toward Venetia, without the astonishment and doubt which had previously commingled therewith, for all uncertainty had been suddenly cleared up by her own words, and he now knew that she was the same whom he had met before, but under circumstances of a very, very different character from those in which

she was now placed. "I thank your ladyship," he continued, "for this polite, this courteous, this kind invitation, but I am about to take leave of his Royal Highness, and have then an engagement of a business nature elsewhere."

"In that case I excuse you this evening, Sir Valentine," exclaimed Venetia, "but I shall expect you to favour me with a call just the same as if you had actually been present at my soirée this evening. Now mind," she added, with a meaning glance, "I wish to see you," and as at that moment the prince was looking at his watch, and comparing it with the timepiece on the mantel, for he now suddenly recollected that other appointment which he had for ten o'clock, Lady Sackville placed her finger for a moment upon her lip, and again extending her hand affably to Valentine, wished him "good evening."

He gave a slight but perceptible inclination of his head, to show that he understood the meaning of that signal she had so rapidly made, and that he would preserve silence relative to whatever topic it was she had thus mutely but eloquently alluded to, and the brilliant Venetia then quitted the room. Valentine therefore took his leave of the prince, who shook him cordially by the hand, observing, "Whatever I can do for you, whatever favour the possession of power can bestow, you have but to name your wish at any time, and it shall be gratified."

Malvern again thanked the prince for this proffered generosity, and left the room. In the passage outside a domestic was waiting to escort him down-stairs again, and he issued forth from the palace.

But instead of proceeding straight homeward, indeed, without even quitting the vicinage of Carlton House, he hastened in the direction of the carriageway leading down to the private door. Consulting his watch by a street-lamp, he saw that it wanted five minutes to ten, and thus the hour of appointment for the prince and the writer of the letter was close at hand. At this very moment an ill-looking fellow came along Pall Mall, and Malvern, judging by his apparel that he was a man who would not refuse to go upon an errand if well paid, at once stopped him.

"I will give you a guinea," he said, "if you will run for me as far as Bow Street, or, rather, Long Acre."

"Ay, to be sure," returned the man, in a voice that was

not a whit more musical than his countenance was pleasing; but Malvern had not time to make any reflections upon all this.

"Here is the guinea," he hastily continued, "and now you must lose no time, but run up to Mr. Lawrence Sampson's. Do you know where he lives?"

"Well, I rather think I do," replied the man, with a sort of ironical tone. "Everybody knows him, and he knows everybody."

"Well, then, be quick, and tell him to come down here at once. Explain to him this very spot. You can't mistake it, — the passage leading out of Pall Mall to the private door —"

"I know all about it," interrupted the man. "What name shall I say? 'Cause why, Larry — I mean Mr. Sampson — mayn't believe me,"

"Tell him that Mr. Valentine Malvern," quickly rejoined the young gentleman, "has sent you. But one moment," he exclaimed, the thought striking him that, being paid beforehand, the fellow might not take the trouble to perform the errand. "You can come back the moment you have delivered your message; you will find me somewhere about here, and I will give you another guinea."

"Well and good," exclaimed the man. "You are a regular gentleman and no mistake," and away sped the fellow in the direction of Long Acre, muttering to himself, "Well, I'm blowed if this don't look uncommon like an adventure where accident seems resolved that I shall have the putting of a finger in the pie."

CHAPTER XXXIX

A FAVOURITE VISITRESS

When Valentine Malvern took his leave of the prince in the manner already described, his Royal Highness did not return to Lady Sackville's suite of apartments, in compliance with her request. He sent up a message to the effect that important business had just transpired to detain him away a little longer, but that he would assuredly rejoin her gay assembly by eleven o'clock.

Having taken this precaution to guard against the chance of being sought after by her during the next hour, the prince at once repaired to an apartment in the immediate vicinage of the private staircase, and which has before been described to the reader. It was that one where he received Venetia, not on the first occasion of her visit to Carlton House when still simple Miss Trelawney, but on that evening when, after her marriage with Sackville, she for the first time abandoned herself to the royal voluptuary's embrace. From this apartment a side-door opened into a bedchamber fitted up with a surpassing luxury. This door was, however, closed for the present, but no doubt the prince intended that it should presently be opened, else why had he resolved upon receiving his expected visitant in the small but sumptuously furnished apartment which he had now sought?

The table was spread with wines, and with a choice dessert of the most delicious fruits in or out of season. The curtains were drawn over the windows, the atmosphere was perfumed with flowers in porcelain vases, and the splendid lustre hanging to the ceiling diffused a golden light through the room. The general aspect thereof was luxurious to a degree, and throwing himself upon the sofa near which the table was placed, the prince began to give way to those

voluptuous reflections and sensual imaginings which were most congenial to his mind.

Although he had been moved by the nature of his interview with Valentine Malvern, yes, and more deeply moved, too, than he had perhaps been for many, many years, yet the effect soon wore off. Indeed, none of the better feelings of nature could become the means of making any permanent impression upon his mind. Nor did he allow such a salutary influence to abide with him one moment longer than he could shake it off by a natural effort or by the aid of artificial stimulants. Thus was it that on the present occasion he at once, on entering this room, had recourse to the wine-decanter to dispel the feeling of chastening sadness and mournful memory produced by the interview with Malvern, and as the fervid glow of the generous fluid suffused itself throughout his frame, he at once plunged into that fount of luxurious imaginings whence he drew his most sensual inspirations.

It was a splendid woman who was about to visit him, a woman whose voluptuous beauties were second only to those of Venetia, a woman in whose arms he had before revelled, and whose provocative powers for amorous play he well knew. What though she was not merely profligate to a degree, but also stained with crime? What though she had sought to shed human blood, and that she had only escaped being an actual murderess by the recovery of her victim? For all this the prince regent recked not. He remembered only the enchanting loveliness of her countenance, the firm and swelling fulness of her form, the passion that glowed in her fine dark eyes, the halo of sensuousness and the perfume of love in which she appeared to exist when under the influence of passion and desire.

While thus abandoning himself to his luscious imaginings, the prince was interrupted by the opening of a door covered with a velvet curtain, and his confidential valet Germain, appearing for a moment on the threshold, introduced a lady cloaked and veiled. He then immediately withdrew, the door closed, the velvet curtain fell back, and the prince hastened to give a cordial welcome to Lady Ernestina Dysart.

She was no longer dressed in mourning. Indeed, the widow's weeds which for the sake of appearances she had

worn for a few months had been for some time laid aside, and as she now put off her handsome bonnet with its thick black veil, and her mantle, so light, so elegant, and so well fitted for wear on a summer's night, she stood before the prince in a figured silk dress of the richest material, and which, setting close to her shape, revealed all its grand proportions to their utmost advantage. Cut low in the body, and leaving the arms entirely bare, that dress developed the fine contour of her person in a manner but too well calculated to produce a powerful effect upon the prince, and as he gazed upon her after conducting her to a seat, and placing himself by her side, he was satisfied that no mental excitement or vexation which she might have endured had in any way marred the ravishing attractions of her charms.

Had she been a fiend in human shape, and he had known that such was the fact, still would all his ideas and all his thoughts have been absorbed in the sense of enjoyment which the contact of so splendid and voluptuous a beauty inspired. Her hair showered in light brown tresses over her shoulders so dazzling in their polished whiteness. Her neck was graceful in its swanlike curvature, and of alabaster fairness. Grandly rose her bosom from the ample chest, its full luxuriance and richness of volume making the waist seem even more delicate than it really was. Her large dark eyes, contrasting in colour so strongly with her hair, but shaded with dark lashes, were full of passion's lustre, and from beneath their fringe they flung forth wanton looks upon the prince, as if to rivet that hold which the effect of her charms had already taken upon his senses. At the same time her scarlet lips, slightly parting with a smile ineffably bewitching, revealed the pearly teeth, and her balmy breath fanned the cheek of his Royal Highness as he gradually approached his countenance toward her own.

"You are beautiful, Ernestina, beautiful as ever," he exclaimed, flinging his arms around her, and then pressing his lips to her delicious mouth. "Ah! full well do I remember the first time I ever beheld you. Beautiful enchantress, lovely deceiver that you were, you made me fancy you came from some far-off Orient clime, and such was the magic influence of your charms, that I believed you. Indeed, had you assured me that you were an angel descended from

heaven, I should have believed you equally as well, yes, I should have believed you."

"You allude, dear prince, to that memorable night," she said, with an arch smile in which were concentrated a thousand fascinations, "when you were brought in such a mysterious way to Beechey Manor, and when I appeared in the gossamer dress."

"Ah! that gossamer dress!" exclaimed the prince, not only feasting his eyes with the presence of the beauteous woman, but also his imagination with the memory of past delights. "Never, never shall I forget how wondrously it became you. You were apparelled as if in an Eastern fashion, with a splendid shawl around the waist, pearls upon the neck, and bracelets upon your arms. Oh, you looked like an Oriental Sultana, in the mingled magnificence, softness, lustre, and luxuriance of your beauty."

"You render me quite vain with all these compliments," murmured Ernestina, throwing a tremulousness into her musical voice, and fixing upon the prince the dangerous fascination of her large, dark eyes.

"No, you cannot be rendered vain, because I am paying you no compliment," he said, reclining his head upon her shoulder. "I am telling you the truth. Think you that if you were not so wondrously beautiful, think you that I should not have been offended by the stratagem set on foot that night and by the part which you played in it? But no, not for an instant did I feel vexed or angry. All the alarm and all the annoyance I had experienced, and all sense of outrage I felt, were amply compensated for by the presence of your beauty and the delights of Paradise I tasted in your arms. In respect to such scenes as those, my memory is immortal, and assuredly, Ernestina, one of the brightest chapters in my life was the adventure which made you mine on that blissful night. Nor have I forgotten the second time when we met. Do you remember? It was at your uncle, Lord Leveson's, and as I entered the room you were seated at the harp."

"Think you that my memory is less vivid than your own?" asked the wily Ernestina, drawing down the prince's head in such a way that it now rested upon her heaving bosom, "You know that I love you, my prince, and never has your image been absent from my memory since that night when

first we met at Beechey Manor. But you," she continued, with a deep sigh, " have so many lovely faces at all times to form the varied subjects of your thoughts, that when I was away doubtless my image never intruded itself upon your mind."

" On the contrary, dear Ernestina, I have thought of you often," exclaimed the prince. " Indeed, you and Lady Sackville are the two handsomest women in all England, — not only in all England, but in all the world."

" Ah! if I really thought that you meant what you said," exclaimed Ernestina; and then bending her countenance down till it touched his own as it lay pillowed upon her bosom, she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses.

" Why should you mistrust my love for you, Ernestina? " asked the prince. " Have I ever done aught, either by word or deed, to make you think that I do not love you, that I do not entertain a delightful recollection of the joys I have experienced in your arms? And have I not this night convinced you by the reception I have sought to give you here that my feelings toward you are the same as ever? "

" Yes, my beloved prince," exclaimed Ernestina, " and I thank you, oh, I thank you most sincerely for this goodness on your part. Since last I saw you I have been very, very unhappy — "

" Yes, I have indeed felt for you," interrupted the prince, " for I could well understand the meaning of that terrible adventure on the bridge."

" Oh, and you do not think the worse of me for it? " she asked, in a soft, murmuring tone, with her head still bent down so that her warm cheek rested on the prince's brow.

" Think worse of you for it! " he exclaimed. " No, assuredly not. I suppose it all arose from the persecution you experienced at the hands of that ruffian Coffin? "

" Yes, it was he whom I meant to slay in the recess of Westminster Bridge," replied Ernestina. " But it was some other person whom I struck with the sharp dagger, and the image of the countenance upturned toward me at the moment has haunted me ever since. I instituted a secret inquiry in the neighbourhood and succeeded in learning that the young man was not killed by the blow, but was removed to a doctor's and subsequently recovered. That is all I know relative to the poor young man, for neither could I prosecute

my inquiries openly or fully, nor would the doctor's servants give much information upon the matter. There seemed altogether to be some mystery attendant upon the very presence of that young man in the recess — "

"Well, well," interrupted the prince, "we need not talk longer than is necessary on that painful topic. Suffice it for you to know that the young man did recover, and that therefore no weight need lie upon your conscience. Tell me, then, wherefore have you been absenting yourself from London? Why have you been living in that seclusion to which you refer in your letter in so mournful a strain? Are you afraid of continued persecutions from that villain?"

"Such is indeed my constant terror," replied Ernestina. "You know the monstrous proposition he made to me, and you are well aware that he is capable of backing any such proposal by the most dreadful threats. I am afraid of him, oh, I am afraid of him, and it was to implore your advice, even your intervention, in this matter that I resolved to present myself to you to-night."

"Most welcome are you, dear Ernestina. But tell me how I can serve you, what you wish me to do."

"My object is," she answered, "to be enabled to quit that rural solitude in which I have been burying myself, and return to London to take up my abode at my uncle's house. But this I dare not do, unless relieved from all apprehension on account of Daniel Coffin. For common decency's sake I ought still to be arrayed in widow's weeds."

"You look better as you are, dearest."

"Perhaps; but if I do settle again in London, I must resume my mourning apparel until the prescribed period for such weeds expires. If I allude to this subject of dress at all, it is only to show you that such is the terror in which I stand with regard to the public executioner that I dared not visit London save in a dress which serves as a disguise."

"But let us see what are the sources of all this terror," observed the prince, "so that I may better understand what I can do for you. In the first place, the scoundrel dares not breathe a word relative to the part which we induced him to play in smoothing the road of your husband out of this world, because, were he to tell all he knows of this circumstance, no one would believe him, not a soul would credit the assertion that I had lent myself to such a scheme."

"Be it as you say," returned Ernestina. "But then," she added, hesitatingly, "does he not know that I attempted the life of some one on the bridge that night? That he was there on the occasion I know, for I saw him, and from the little I succeeded in gleaning from the servants at the doctor's house, there was a man answering his description who helped to bear the wounded youth thither."

"Well, but has not the affair all blown over?" asked the prince, of course not choosing to reveal how much he had to do with that night's transaction. "Besides, how could Coffin possibly prove that you were the authoress of the deed? And even if he could, what earthly reason should he have for bringing before a court of justice an affair wherein he himself would have to give some curious explanations? Indeed, was he himself there for any good purpose, I wonder?"

"I admit that it is not reasonable to suppose that he would deliberately drag all these things to light," said Ernestina. "But nevertheless, I live in mortal terror of that man. When he threatens me in his own horrid manner, he excites me so dreadfully that I have not presence of mind to reason whether he will be likely to fulfil his threats or not, but I yield entirely to their influence. I cannot help it, for methinks at the time that in his rage or malignity he is quite capable of exposing everything, even though at the risk of compromising himself. In a word, I dare not, no, I dare not appear openly again in the world of London if that man remains at large with the power to thrust himself upon me, force his way into my presence, intimidate me with threats, or even perhaps make me the victim of brutal violence. This, then, is my position, and it drives me to despair. I thought of getting my uncle the marquis to negotiate with Coffin, so that for a given sum of money or an annual pension he should undertake to leave me free of molestation for evermore. But there is no reliance to be placed on the fellow's word, and indeed I should live in constant terror."

"Well, the position is too awkward, I must admit," said the prince, "and, to speak candidly, my dear Ernestina, I some time ago had the intention of packing the fellow off to the Colonies, or getting rid of him in some way or another. But all the startling events which have since occurred, Bonaparte's return to France, his preparations for war, and

his defeat the other day at Waterloo, all these matters have kept me in such a constant state of excitement that I really have altogether lost sight of that scoundrel Coffin until now."

"And now, therefore," exclaimed Ernestina, taking up the prince's last word, "you will carry your original intention out, will you not? Say, dearest prince, for my sake."

"Yes, anything for your sake, dear, dear Ernestina," he replied, winding his arms around her neck and straining her to his breast.

"Tell me, then, tell me what you will do," she murmured, "so that I may know upon what I may rely and judge how I may act. For, believe me, dearest prince, oh, believe me when I assure you that I can not, will not return into that rural solitude whence I have now emerged. On the contrary, if I thought that within a few days you would get rid of Coffin for me, — for that, in a word, is what I desire and the favour I came to ask of you, — I would return secretly to my uncle's house in Albemarle Street, and there remain until I learned from you that my enemy had been disposed of."

"Do so, do so, dearest Ernestina," rejoined the prince. "When we part presently, hie you home again to Leveson House, and within a few days, so soon as I can arrange some suitable plan, Coffin shall be packed out of the country. Then, the moment this is accomplished, I will come myself to Leveson House to acquaint you with what I have done, and perhaps, Ernestina, we may visit together those secret apartments."

"Yes, anywhere with you, dear George," replied the unprincipled woman, but as splendidly beautiful as she was dissolute; and as she spoke, she fixed upon the prince a look all burning with desire, while the expression of her countenance, flushing and glowing, was so full of wantonness that his own passions were now excited to a maddening degree.

Here, however, we may close our description of this interview, merely observing that it was midnight ere Lady Ernestina Dysart, once more enveloped in her light but ample cloak, and with the dark veil drawn down over her features, issued forth again from the private door of Carlton House.

Then did the prince regent return to the brilliantly lighted saloons where all the élite of the aristocracy and fashion

were gathered together, under the auspices of the magnificent Lady Sackville. It was one of a series of entertainments given to celebrate the Battle of Waterloo, the tidings of which tremendous victory had reached England three weeks previously. Alas! how little were the real consequences of that battle understood, or, rather, how much were they mistaken, by the immense majority of the British people!

However, not to pause for the purpose of political disquisition, let us proceed to remark that this was altogether the most brilliant festival which Lord and Lady Sackville had given since their installation at Carlton House. Of all the galaxy of loveliness, we must especially notice a group of beautiful girls gathered in one corner of the principal saloon, and whose bewitching charms when thus combined irresistibly conjured up the idea of a nosegay of the choicest and most exquisite flowers. Elegantly dressed, in a manner evincing the most refined taste and the best calculated to set off their respective styles of beauty each to the fullest advantage, they had likewise an air of virginal freshness and girlish artlessness about them which gave to this group an undefinable charm. To gaze upon those lovely creatures it would appear a pity indeed that they had ever been introduced into the heated atmosphere of a court life. The closest observer of human nature would not only have guaranteed the virtue of those damsels, but would have beheld in the innocence of their looks and the girlish gaieties of their manners the sign and pledge of their purity. They were not sisters, were not in any way related to each other, but were merely friends, linked, however, in the closest bond which intimacy can possibly weave, for a secret existed amongst them, a secret which was the common property of that sweet group, and which they would not for worlds reveal.

They were the daughters of some of the proudest families of the aristocracy. Two of them were engaged to be married to young noblemen of high rank, great wealth, and handsome persons, and the others felt equally certain of forming alliances quite as eligible. For their extreme beauty, their accomplishments, and their fascinations, as well as their exalted birth and the influence of the families to which they belonged, had already rendered them the objects of tender regard on the part of many suitors.

But if this charming bevy had now contrived to group itself apart from the rest of the brilliant company, and thus retire into a corner to exchange a few words with each other, it was only for a brief space, and in less than five minutes would they be sought for by the gallants who had engaged them as partners for the next dance.

But who were these charming creatures, forming the little group apart from the rest of the assemblage, this perfect nosegay of the sweetest flowers to which we have thus directed such special attention? These fair ones were the same who now and then secretly visited Carlton House, joined in a voluptuous dance for the amusement of the prince, and were in reality upon terms of the utmost familiarity with him. This was the secret which we have above alluded to as being common amongst them; it was the link binding them together in so close an intimacy. Their purity was gone, their chastity existed not. Lovely as they were to the eye, they were nought but pollution beneath the surface. That virginal air which seemed to invest them as with a charm was the mere artificial assumption of what was no longer natural. They were already on the highroad to become Messalinas of depravity.

And so it is with many, alas! too many, of the daughters of the aristocracy. Their very breeding, their rearing, their training gradually adapt them to all possible vices and hypocrisies. The routine of the fashionable boarding-school is a fitting preparative for the more prurient developments to be evoked by the warmth of the atmosphere of pleasure and fashion. How is it possible that girlish artlessness can survive in such a heated air as this? The freshness of the rose languishes and fades in the sickly atmosphere of drawing-rooms. So it is with the daughters of the aristocracy. We do not say with all, but with many, too many; and the virtuous ones prove the exceptions to the rule, and not the rule itself. How otherwise can we account for the fearful demoralization, the inveterate depravity, and the transcending dissoluteness which characterize the married life of the upper classes? The women of that sphere do not put on habits of profligacy at the same time with the bridal garments. No, before they even accompany their husbands to the matrimonial altar they have in many cases already strayed out of the paths of virtue. Hence is it that their progress in

vice continues with such an apparently easy and almost natural gradation down the inclined plane leading to utter dissoluteness.

Reader, this picture of the females of the aristocracy is not too highly coloured, no, nor a whit exaggerated. Ten thousand facts might be brought forward to testify its truth.

CHAPTER XL

WATCHINGS AND PURSUITS

Return we now to Valentine Malvern, whom we left in Pall Mall after he had despatched the ill-looking fellow to fetch Mr. Lawrence Sampson.

No sooner had he thus sent off the messenger whom hazard threw in his way when he began walking about in such a manner as to avoid exciting suspicion that he was in wait for anybody, but so that he could not fail to observe whomsoever might turn into the carriageway leading down to the private door of Carlton House. Not long had he thus waited when he beheld a lady advancing rapidly. She was closely veiled and wrapped in a cloak of light material and elegant make, and she at once turned toward the private door. A cold shudder passed through Malvern's frame as he thought to himself it was possible, nay, even probable, that this female who had just passed him by was either the murderess of his father, or was in some way connected with that sire's mystic disappearance.

Having waited for three or four minutes, so as to allow the lady full time to enter the palace, Valentine proceeded to examine the immediate vicinage of the private door with a close scrutiny, and having done so, he found that there was no other path to reach it save the carriageway leading out of Pall Mall. It was therefore certain that by the same avenue the lady approached Carlton House must she come forth again, unless, indeed, the prince caused her to be escorted out by any other door, which was not at all likely, seeing that the circumstances of her visit indicated her desire that it should be as private as possible.

Having inspected the premises, as just stated, Malvern resumed his walk to and fro in that part of Pall Mall, and

as it was the place of resort for evening loungers in those times as well as at the present day, his prolonged presence there attracted no particular notice. Many and conflicting were the thoughts that passed through his mind: his interview with the prince, all that he had heard relative to his well-beloved Florence Eaton, then his meeting with Venetia, but chiefly of all, the singularity of that coincidence which on the very day that he had refreshed his memory, as it were, with an examination of the unknown lady's writing at Lawrence Sampson's should have thrown in his way another specimen of her penmanship at a time and in a place at which he should least have sought for it, — these were the varied topics of his reflections.

In about a quarter of an hour more Larry Sampson made his appearance, and at once accosting the young gentleman, he said, " Well, sir, what has happened? I presume accident has given you some clue."

" Yes, otherwise I should not have sent thus hurriedly for you," replied Valentine. " In a word, the whole affair now assumes a most delicate, and indeed difficult aspect."

" How so? " asked Sampson. " Tell me everything in a few words, because I have then got something to tell you, but not of any material consequences. And now proceed, sir."

" In a word, then, you must know," continued Valentine, " that I had occasion to call this evening, relative to certain business, upon his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. I was shown to a private room, and there I found the fragment of a letter in the same handwriting as the one which I discovered amongst my father's papers and which is now in your possession. A portion of the letter, indeed that portion which would have contained the signature, was torn away. But all that remained did I read. The writer of that letter is on terms of great intimacy, I should say the fullest intimacy, with his Royal Highness. She says she is leading a retired life, which is perfectly miserable and which she can endure no longer. She makes an appointment to call upon his Royal Highness this evening at ten o'clock, in order to explain to him wherefore she has gone into seclusion, unless, indeed, as she says, he is already acquainted with the circumstances. Such is the substance of the letter. Accordingly, on issuing forth from Carlton House, I seized upon

the first person I saw likely to run upon a message and hurried him off to you."

"You did wisely, sir, in thus sending for me," observed Sampson. "But the lady?"

"I have every reason to believe she is at this moment in Carlton House," responded Valentine. "A few minutes after ten a lady of middle height, enveloped in a cloak, and with a veil entirely concealing her countenance, turned up this avenue here and passed on to the private door. That she is a lady so far as her station of life is concerned is beyond all doubt. Her gait, her walk, the tastefulness of her apparel, of which I could see enough by the lamplight as she passed me by, all prove that she is of quality and station, I am almost inclined to think of rank."

"And she is there now?" observed Sampson, inquiringly.

"She is there now," answered Malvern. "Since she is very intimate with the prince, and may have a long story to tell him, as well as a great deal to consult him about, it is probable her interview will be somewhat lengthy."

"Well, sir," remarked Sampson, "as you observe, the thing is altogether delicate and difficult, seeing that the lady, whoever she may be, is on such intimate terms with his Royal Highness. But we must endeavour to find out who she is, and then make inquiries as to her private life, her pursuits, and so forth. While this is being done, she must not be lost sight of, but shall be watched day and night, all her movements followed, every step dogged. This is the course to be adopted, and the only one."

"I agree with you fully," answered Malvern. "Of course it will be impossible to arrest the lady on such meagre evidence as we now possess — "

"Besides, after all," interrupted Sampson, "it does not necessarily follow that because she was engaged in an intrigue with your father, she must have made away with him, although what little we know relative to her true character is certainly calculated to produce no very favourable impression."

"Assuredly not," observed Malvern. "And I know not how to account for it, unless by the belief that this woman, if not the actual murderess of my sire, is at all events privy to the circumstances of his disappearance, but as she passed

me ere now, a cold shudder, like a feeling of superstitious awe, seized upon me."

"The imagination will do that, sir," observed Mr. Lawrence Sampson, coolly, for being a very matter-of-fact man, he had not much faith in such metaphysical evidences as that to which Valentine was alluding. Indeed, Larry considered one good, living, breathing witness in human shape to be worth all the secret presentiments, shudders, tremors, or quiverings in the world.

"You observed ere now that you had something to tell me," remarked Malvern.

"Yes," exclaimed Sampson, now recollecting the circumstance. "Do you, by any accident, happen to have a suspicion of who the man was that you sent with the message to bring me hither?"

"I have not an idea," said Malvern, surprised at the question, for the individual alluded to was a perfect stranger to him.

"That man," continued Larry, "is a notorious person in his way, and as desperate a character as ever lived. He has escaped from my clutches once, but I think that before long he will get himself into a scrape again, and next time I shall take very good care he does not escape."

"But to whom do you allude?" asked Valentine, with increased surprise.

"Ah! pardon me, sir, for inflicting my comments upon you," exclaimed Sampson. "That man whom you sent to me just now, and of whom we are speaking, is Daniel Coffin, the public executioner."

"Ah!" ejaculated Malvern, for even with a person of the strongest mind there may be something to shock or startle in such an announcement as this. "By the bye, I told him to come back and I would give him another guinea."

"Which he has taken very good care to do," observed Sampson. "He assured me he was to come back again to receive the extra fee. I offered to give it him, in order, as I said, to save him the trouble of retracing his steps, but really and truly to save you, sir, from being again brought in contact with such a fellow. But he said he was determined to come himself, as he thought it would be better."

"Where is he?" asked Malvern.

" There," returned Sampson, pointing across Pall Mall to a dark figure lounging to and fro on the other side.

" Go and give him the promised guinea," said Malvern, " and dismiss him at once."

Sampson accordingly traversed the street, and accosting the Hangman, put the money into his hand, saying, " There! I told you there would be no further need of your services. You can go your ways now."

" One word," said Coffin. " That's the Mr. Malvern whose father disappeared in such a queer way about a year ago, isn't it? "

" Yes," replied Sampson. " Why do you ask? "

" Oh, only just for curiosity's sake," returned Coffin. " Good night, Mr. Sampson," and he walked away.

But the Hangman did not really disappear from the scene. He saw that something was going on, and he was resolved to watch from a distance. Accordingly, after pretending to tramp away, he returned just so far as to be able to see everything without being seen, for not only was he impelled by a certain curiosity to penetrate into anything which appeared mysterious, but he likewise entertained so cordial a hatred for Larry Sampson that he would go many miles out of his way to do him an injury when it could be inflicted without fear of a rebound.

On rejoining Valentine Malvern, the Bow Street officer said, " I do not think it is necessary, sir, for you to remain here any longer. On the contrary, it is better that only one person should be seen loitering about here. You can accordingly return home, and I will remain upon the watch. I must get you first, however, to give me as accurate a description as you can of the lady's dress, so that I may not possibly make any mistake, and I must likewise ask you to have the goodness to take a hackney-coach and go around by the Bow Street watch-house, to deliver a little message for me."

Malvern at once gave the required description of the dress as well as he had been enabled to distinguish it by the uncertain light prevailing in the street at that hour, and he then intimated his readiness to convey any message Sampson might have to send to Bow Street.

" Be so kind, then, sir, to go to the watch-house there, and say that Mr. Sampson wants one of his men to be sent down to Pall Mall directly. Just please to hint that it's to

keep a lookout on a house that I want a man for, and they will arrange at the watch-house accordingly."

Malvern promised to deliver this message, and then observed that he should like to see Sampson again that night, to learn his success in tracing the lady to her abode, wherever it might be, and discovering who she was.

" I can well understand your anxiety, sir, in this respect," replied Sampson, " and if you will sit up for me I will be sure to call upon you, no matter at what hour, in order to report the result of the adventure."

Malvern then hurried away and having visited the watch-house in Bow Street to deliver Sampson's message, he proceeded straight home to his mansion in Hanover Square.

The Bow Street officer lounged about in Pall Mall, and in about twenty minutes a wretched-looking object, clothed in rags, and carrying a bundle of matches, came crawling along the pavement. But the moment he observed Sampson, signs of intelligence passed between them, quick as thought, and the wretched-looking mendicant, immediately crossing Pall Mall, threw himself down on a door-step opposite to where Sampson was walking about. For this seeming beggar was none other than one of the Bow Street officer's most active and intelligent men, and who had come down thus disguised in consequence of the message delivered by Valentine Malvern.

As the reader is already aware, it was nearly twelve o'clock before Lady Ernestina Dysart issued forth again from Carlton House. When she did thus emerge once more after her long and amorous interview with the prince regent, she had her veil drawn in thick folds over her countenance, and her cloak wrapped around her, so that it was impossible even for her own brother, had he been there at the time, to have recognized her. Neither did Larry Sampson, but he did at once know that it was the same whose dress Valentine had described to him, and he accordingly followed her at such a distance that, without approaching near enough to excite her attention, he never once lost her from his view as she passed through St. James's Square up into Piccadilly, and thence into Albemarle Street. Great now was the astonishment of Mr. Sampson when he perceived that she stopped and knocked at the door of the Marquis of Leveson's house. But perhaps never in all his

lifetime had his wonderment been excited to so high a pitch as it was when he obtained a glimpse of her countenance as she threw up her veil upon entering the hall. This glimpse he caught at the moment ere the porter closed the front door again, and by the powerful light which blazed inside the palatial mansion and streamed indeed through the open portals into the street did the Bow Street officer recognize the splendid countenance of Lady Ernestina Dysart.

The front door was closed again, and the flood of lustre which had poured forth was now only seen through the hall windows, but still the Bow Street officer stood on the opposite side of the way, transfixed, as it were, to the pavement, and with his looks riveted upon that portal which had just shut Lady Ernestina from his view. But from this reverie of astonishment he was speedily aroused by somebody brushing against him, and looking around, he beheld his underling who was disguised as a beggar.

"You know Lady Ernestina Dysart by sight?" said Lawrence Sampson to his man. "You saw her once at Newgate when she went to visit her husband. Keep a watch on her, follow her wherever she goes; it is of the utmost importance. You shall be relieved to-morrow morning about the usual time."

Larry then hastened away, and took the shortest cut to Hanover Square. Valentine Malvern was anxiously expecting him, and the moment the Bow Street officer was shown into his presence, he saw by his countenance that he had some important communication to make.

"Well, you have traced the lady to her dwelling?" exclaimed the young gentleman. "Where does she live, and who is she?"

"She lives at Leveson House," answered Larry Sampson, "and she is Lady Ernestina Dysart, the marquis's niece."

"Good heavens! what do you tell me?" exclaimed Malvern. "If this be the case, what are we to surmise? A perfect horror! — that she gave information against her own husband and sent him to the scaffold."

"Yes, that is positive beyond all doubt," rejoined Sampson, "and if she were capable of such an atrocity, it is by no means improbable that she has perpetrated even more flagrant enormities. But we can neither do nor say more at present. I must not only think over the matter seriously,

but likewise institute the most searching inquiries into her past life. Ah!" suddenly ejaculated the officer, as an idea struck him while turning to leave the room, "this accounts for her keeping the letter which I took her to Leveson House when making the inquiry on your account many months ago. It was her own letter, the anonymous one she had written to the magistrate, giving the information that placed her husband in the grasp of justice. I am afraid she is a bad one, a very, very bad one."

And with these words Mr. Lawrence Sampson took his departure, leaving Valentine Malvern to meditate upon the extraordinary discovery which had this night been brought about.

But in the meantime what had Daniel Coffin, the public executioner, been doing? From his hiding-place in Pall Mall he also had seen the veiled and cloaked lady issue forth from the avenue leading down to the private door of Carlton House, and he at once observed that she became the object of Lawrence Sampson's pursuit. The beggar, or, rather, the disguised officer, was also following at a distance, and Coffin having noticed the evident intelligence which existed between the two, had no difficulty in comprehending at once that this seeming mendicant was in reality an agent of the police. The Hangman had therefore a difficult course to steer, for he also had his own reasons for wishing to see what was going on, and he was equally anxious to escape observation. He accordingly proceeded in such a way as to keep the lady, Sampson, and the disguised beggar all three in sight at the same time, while he continued to remain unseen by all. In this manner was the vicinage of Albemarle Street reached, and as soon as the lady turned up that thoroughfare, the Hangman muttered to himself, "Ah! well, now I know who she is for a million, and, by Satan! it must be just as I thought. Young Malvern is after her; they have somehow or other got on the right scent — But what's the use of my standing chaffing with myself here? I must to business."

Meanwhile Lady Ernestina Dysart, having entered Leveson House in the manner already described, learned that her uncle the marquis was entertaining a select circle to celebrate the recent victory in Belgium, and as a matter of

"SHE BEHELD ANOTHER FACE"
Original etchings by Marcel

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Original etching by Marcel.

AD MARCEL

course the domestics at once proposed to acquaint his lordship with Lady Ernestina's return. But she desired them not to do so. She was wearied; she, moreover, was not in mourning, and could not therefore be seen by any of her uncle's guests; and she was also anxious to pass the next few days in as much privacy as possible, for reasons already explained. She therefore bade one of the servants serve her up some supper in a retired parlour, and when she had partaken of refreshments, she hastened up to her bedchamber, which was always kept ready for her reception.

Upon entering this room, from which she had been absent for several months, she experienced a comfort and consolation such as one feels when meeting with old and familiar friends. Hastily dismissing the maid, with whose services she dispensed on the present occasion, for she wished to be alone so as to commune with her own thoughts, Lady Ernestina locked the door, laid aside her bonnet and cloak, and began to disapparel herself.

Standing before the glass, Ernestina let loose all the luxuriance of her light brown hair, which she began to comb out. The mirror reflected her exquisite form, about which the unfastened drapery now fell with a kind of classic air. Her splendid bust was exposed in all its dazzling whiteness and rich exuberance, and as her head was partially thrown back, while she combed out the long masses of her shining hair, her countenance caught the light of the wax tapers with a Rembrandt effect. On her cheeks there was a deepening of the carnation hue as she thought of the latter portion of her interview with his Royal Highness, and knowing that she was beautiful, aware, also, that she was admired, with true patrician profligacy did she feel a thrill of pride on account of being the paramour of royalty; so that while the glow gently suffused her cheeks, the light of satisfaction flashed from her fine dark eyes.

But heavens! all in an instant, while thus surveying herself in the mirror, she beheld another face, a hideous one, in horrible contrast with her own, and springing around with a fearful start and a suppressed shriek, she became paralyzed with horror on finding herself confronted by the terrible Hangman.

CHAPTER XLI

THE PUBLIC EXECUTIONER AND THE PATRICIAN LADY ONCE MORE

For nearly a minute did Daniel Coffin in silence survey, with devouring eyes and gloating looks, the splendid woman who thus stood before him in all the voluptuous undress of the hour and the occasion. The fellow, who, monster of ugliness though he were, was nevertheless insatiate in his desires and furious in his passions, felt the blood coursing like lightning through his veins, and he inwardly resolved to make that charming creature his own ere he was half an hour older, no matter what the consequences might be.

During the minute that he thus stood gazing upon her, Lady Ernestina herself was so stupefied with ineffable horror, so completely a prey to a fearful consternation, that she remained motionless and statue-like, not having even the thought to draw the loose drapery over the bosom on which the villain's eyes were fixed so gloatingly. But suddenly starting from that state of petrifaction, she sprang toward the bell-rope. Coffin, however, intercepted her more quickly still, and winding his arms around her half-undraped form, he strained her in his loathsome embrace, at the same time muttering the most awful threats if she dared cry out.

"For God's sake, release me!" said the wretched woman, scarcely able to articulate the words, for the reader may rest assured that it was not through the Hangman's menaces that she failed to give vent to rending shrieks and piercing screams, but simply because the direst horror had almost completely subdued every faculty.

"Release you! Yes, but only for a minute or so," said the Hangman, "that we may have a quiet chat and get

a little cool upon the matter, so as to understand each other better than we have ever done yet."

Thus speaking, he deposited the half-fainting lady upon a chair, and seating himself in another opposite to her, he again surveyed her with all the devouring intensity of one who feels assured of possessing the object of his desire, and experiences a delight in feasting his imagination with those joys the reality of which he is about to make his own.

"Why do you persecute me thus?" demanded Lady Ernestina, now rapidly recovering, if not exactly her presence of mind, at all events a dread consciousness of the horrors of her position, together with a keen appreciation of the necessity of doing something to avert the hideous catastrophe with which she was threatened. "Tell me, why do you pursue me thus? You must have watched me, you must have dogged me — Why, why do you do it?" and with nervous quickness did she cover her bosom and draw all her loosened raiment around her.

"When you come to hear all I have got to say," returned Coffin, "you will fall down on your knees and thank me for coming for'ard as a friend at a moment when you stand in such precious need of one."

"What on earth do you mean?" cried the lady, now starting with hysterical affright, for there was ever in her mind at least one subject to which all her terrors invariably pointed whenever raised up.

"I mean, my dear creature," answered the Hangman, with brutal familiarity, "that if you don't choose to accept me as a lover, it's deuced likely I shall have the unpleasant task of tucking you up at the Old Bailey."

Lady Ernestina gave a convulsive start, which more resembled the sudden writhing of anguish, as these words smote with awful ominousness upon her ears. She tried to speak, but could not. Her feelings choked her, her face was ghastly pale, her lips white as those of death, and quivering fearfully, while her eyes glared in dread consternation upon the public executioner.

"Come, come," he said, "there's nothing for you to be annoyed at, if so be you only keep good friends with me, for I can save you, and I will."

"Save me! Save me from what?" she gasped forth, now partially recovering the faculty of speech.

"Why, in plain terms," rejoined the Hangman, "you have been watched from Carlton House. There's young Malvern and Larry Sampson — "

"Ah!" gasped Lady Ernestina, and she sank back in her chair, not in a fit, not in a state of unconsciousness, but in a dismay so tremendous that she felt as if she were passing through the crucifying phases of a hideous dream, a dream too awful to be impressed with reality.

"Don't give way to despair," resumed the Hangman, "'cause why, there's plenty of time and means, too, to escape this danger. But shall I tell you all about it? Well, then, I suppose I had better," he continued, receiving no answer, but observing that the unhappy lady still gazed upon him in a sort of horrible stupor. "You see, I was coming along Pall Mall when a young genelman — a tall and good-looking fellow, too — stopped me just by that private avenue leading down to the convenient side-door of Carlton House, and thinking that I was some poor devil that would like to earn a guinea, — because, you see, it isn't my habit to dress overwell except on a Sunday, and then I come out spicy — well, but this young fellow bids me run and fetch down Larry Sampson, and he tells me that his name is Mr. Valentine Malvern. I thought this looked like an adventure in which I might have a finger, so when I had fetched Larry, I watched at a distance. Young Malvern went away, but soon after, Larry was joined by one of his runners, or agents, — whatever you choose to call them, — in the disguise of a beggar-man. So I was now more convinced than ever that there must be something queer in the wind, and I determined to see what it was. I therefore watched, and, lo and behold! presently out comes a lady cloaked and veiled from the private door of the palace."

"Ah! that was I," ejaculated Ernestina, with a sudden start, as the stupor of consternation quickly left her, and she now became fearfully interested in the tale which the Hangman was telling. "Go on, go on," she cried, trembling visibly from head to foot, and no longer perceiving in that man a hideous monster of whom she was afraid, she now looked upon him as one who held her very life in his hands and who had promised to save her.

"Well, ma'am," he continued, "you was so completely

wrapped up, and not being in mourning, too, that it never for an instant struck me who you was. So I followed you, because I saw Sampson and the disguised officer following also, but the moment I saw you turn up into Albemarle Street, it flashed to my mind like lightning who you was. I put two and two together, as one may say, all in a moment. For it struck me that as young Malvern's father had disappeared in such a rum way last year, it must have been him that I buried down at the Blackheath Villa."

"My God! my God!" moaned the wretched Lady Ernestina, clasping her hands agonizingly.

"Don't take on like this, I tell you," said the Hangman, "but hear me out first, and then you shall decide what's to be done."

"But if I have been watched, if I am known," now half-shrieked forth the miserable lady, suddenly inspired with goading apprehensions of imminent danger, "I must fly, I must speed hence."

"Nonsense, I tell you. Sit quiet," exclaimed the Hangman, impatiently. "There's nothing to fear for the present, and if you will only listen to me."

"Well, well, go on, go on," said Lady Ernestina, in the tremor and flutter of a fearful excitement.

"You see, ma'am," continued Coffin, "it never had struck me before who the gentleman might have been that I buried down at Blackheath nearly a year ago, but just now the truth flashed to my mind like lightning. Why should young Malvern be watching you, and why should Sampson have a finger in the pie? I saw it all in a moment. So thought I, if so be Lady Ernestina only chooses to make herself amiable and agreeable to me, I'll help her out of this trouble. Thereupon I just cast an eye around about the house, and I saw that Larry Sampson was gone, but that the chap disguised as a beggar is keeping watch opposite."

"Heavens! then I am already a captive?" groaned Lady Ernestina, her bosom convulsing with an almost suffocating sigh.

"Oh, but there's more ways of getting out of a house than by the front door," rejoined the Hangman, with a grin, "or else I shouldn't have been able to have got in here at all. Howsomever, when I saw that Larry had gone and his chap

was watching opposite, I knew that nothing was to be done, at least for the rest of this night. Oh, I am up to all the dodges of them Bow Street fellows. I suppose they have got a clue to your ladyship somehow or another, but it isn't quite strong enough yet to warrant Larry to take you up, or else he's got others to consult."

"But do you believe it possible that the officers of justice would dare arrest me, the Marquis of Leveson's niece, the friend of the prince regent?" and as Lady Ernestina thus spoke, a look of mingled assurance and hauteur glowed upon her countenance.

"Arrest you, my dear creature!" cried the Hangman, with a sort of compassionate familiarity. "Larry Sampson would as soon arrest you as anybody else. Didn't he take your husband, without pity or remorse?"

"True!" murmured the lady, in a faint tone. "That dreadful Bow Street officer would arrest his own father or mother if what he calls his duty enjoined him. But what is to be done? What advice can you give me?" she asked, a sudden wildness displaying itself in her features.

"There's only one thing to do, and that is to escape," replied Daniel Coffin.

"Escape!" echoed the lady, starting from her chair. "Yes, let us escape at once."

"No, not at once," was the Hangman's quick response. "We must wait till the house is all quiet."

"How did you penetrate hither?" demanded Lady Ernestina, abruptly.

"By the back way," returned the Hangman. "There's an empty house a little higher up, and so I went quietly through that, and then crept along the yard walls till I got into the yard belonging to this house. Once there, it wasn't difficult for a genelman like me to insinuate himself inside," and thus speaking, Coffin displayed the small crowbar and bunch of skeleton keys which he almost invariably carried about in the capacious pocket of his greasy fustian coat.

"And you would have me escape by that same way?" cried Lady Ernestina, — "climbing over walls —"

"By Satan, ma'am! there's no other way for you," interrupted Coffin, "because Sampson's runner is keeping a close watch in the street, and, depend upon it, if you

attempt to leave by the front door, he will pounce upon you at once."

"Good heavens! what is to be done?" said Ernestina, wringing her hands. Then rising from her seat, she began pacing nervously to and fro. "I must see my uncle, I must tell him everything. Or stay, I will be off to the palace and crave the protection of the prince regent —"

"All the uncles and prince regents in the world," interjected the Hangman, in his coarse, rough voice, "will not prevent Larry Sampson from doing his duty. The best thing you can do, ma'am, is to escape with me in an hour or so, come to my house and stay quiet there till the next night, when you can get off to Dover, and so across to France."

"Yes, there is no alternative," moaned the wretched Ernestina; but then, as a withering, blighting reflection flashed through her brain, reminding her of the price which the Hangman, by the very gloating looks which he fixed upon her, was about to demand for his services, she reeled, staggered back against the couch, and would have fallen had she not clung to the bedposts for support. "No, no, no!" she murmured, with a convulsive shuddering, "anything sooner than that!"

"Oh, very good, ma'am," said the public executioner, perfectly understanding what was passing in her mind. "Then I see that my presence here is of no use, so I'll just take myself off, dropping a hint to the police-runner in the street that if he wants to prevent your ladyship from escaping he had better come in boldly and arrest you at once."

Thus speaking, Daniel Coffin moved toward the door, but Ernestina bounded after him and caught him by the arm, saying, in a thick, husky voice, "No, you will not precipitate my ruin."

"Come, now," resumed the Hangman, turning back from the door and fixing his eyes with devouring regards upon the trembling, agitated, almost sinking form of the lady who stood before him, the object of ineffable wretchedness, "let us have no more nonsense of any kind. Considering the past, you ought to be uncommon obliged to me for coming to do you a favour now, 'cause why, I haven't forgot the precious slippery trick you meant to play me on Westminster Bridge that night."

"Ah!" moaned Lady Ernestina, shuddering more convulsively and more visibly than before.

"Yes, you may well be sorry for that business, because it was a deuced bad piece of treachery on your part. No doubt you meant to stick that dagger into me."

"My God! what will become of me?" and with a subdued half-stifled shriek Lady Ernestina pressed her hands to her throbbing brows, for she felt as if her senses were abandoning her.

"An hour in your arms, and I will save you," said the Hangman, in the quick, hoarse voice of brutal passion.

"Never, never; I will die first," exclaimed Ernestina, in a wild tone, and she darted frantically toward the bell-rope.

But again did the public executioner anticipate the movement, again were his powerful rough arms flung around the beautiful patrician form, and as she felt the shriek which rose to her lips dying unuttered there, she gave a deep moan of despair, and her senses abandoned her.

When Lady Ernestina Dysart came to herself, she was lying upon the couch, and the Hangman was by her side.

For a few moments she could not believe her eyes, she could not credit the full horror of her thoughts. She pressed her hand to her brow, closed her eyelids tight, then opened them again, and by the light of the tapers burning on the toilet-table beheld the same hideous reality.

"Eternal God! is it possible?" she murmured, in accents so full of deep, concentrated, indescribable horror that such a state of feeling seemed to be the prelude to suicide, and again did she cover her eyes with her hands, as if to shut out the tremendous presence of the Hangman.

But we shall not linger upon this scene. We dare not, must not pause to describe the coarse brutality and ribald terms in which the public executioner gloated over his victim and made her conscious that all the crowning infamy of her shame had been consummated.

Spirit-broken, feeling herself twenty years older in mind, body, and awful experience than she was an hour back, the miserable, miserable Ernestina dragged herself from the couch, and sitting down upon a chair, she buried her face in her hands and gave way to the mingled horror and

anguish of her thoughts. She did not weep; she was even denied the solace of tears. Her eyeballs throbbed, and felt burning in their sockets, as if indeed living cinders, red-hot, were there. Excruciating fires were also glowing in her brain, and yet her limbs were cold as ice. She felt as if she were dying, as if all the chords which bound her to existence were giving way, as if life were gradually parting from her.

For three or four minutes did she thus remain rocking herself gently to and fro, as she sat with her elbows resting on her knees and her face buried in her hands. A few low moans bespoke the awful anguish which filled her heart well-nigh to bursting. At length she was startled from this awful reverie by a voice which sounded like that of doom upon her ears.

"Come now, don't take on like this."

"Enough! leave me!" ejaculated Ernestina, and suddenly springing up from her seat, she revealed her frightfully pallid, indeed ghastly, countenance to the Hangman, while with the right arm extended she pointed toward the door.

"But you can't escape without me," he observed, though in a hesitating manner, for he was actually frightened at the awful appearance which the outraged woman now presented to his view.

"Escape!" she ejaculated, her lips writhing with ineffable scorn, and at the same time her eyes flashed the lurid light of most hateful defiance. "Sooner the scaffold than escape with thee. Begone!" and with the wildness of a maniac did she continue pointing toward the door.

"I can't and I won't leave you in this scrape," said the Hangman, doggedly. "You must come."

"Ay, to be made your mistress!" cried Ernestina, with the intensest, most malignant, most concentrated bitterness alike of voice and manner, "to be dragged through the mire of all conceivable as well as all inconceivable pollutions, to be besmeared and bespattered with all the filth and feculence of the hideous morass in which you and all your reptile-equals swarm in pestilential existence! No, by Heaven, rather the felon's gaol at once, the condemned cell, and all the hideous paraphernalia of the scaffold. What, go away with you? Place myself still more deeply in your power than

I already am? No, no, ten thousand times no! Sooner the lazar-house or the lunatic asylum. And now begone! I command you to be begone!"

While thus she spoke, her eyes appeared to burn with a living fire, and a fearful expression of mingled hatred and resoluteness was upon her distorting features, so that the Hangman quailed in the presence of that incensed, outraged woman who seemed to have lost all the weakness of her sex and to be animated with the spirit of an avenging fiend.

END OF VOLUME IX.